

THE
PINFOLD



J. S. FLETCHER

DATE DUE

MAR 9 1983

Pryor

102099

DEACCESSIONED

THE PINFOLD

ALSO BY
J. S. FLETCHER

I'D VENTURE ALL FOR THEE
HARDICAN'S HOLLOW
THE HARVEST MOON
DANIEL QUAYNE
MARCHESTER ROYAL
THE ROOT OF ALL EVIL
MILL OF MANY WINDOWS
SECRET OF THE BARBICAN
THE HEAVEN KISSED HILL
THE COPPER BOX
THE VALLEY OF HEADSTRONG MEN

THE PINFOLD

BY
J. S. FLETCHER



M 498962

GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK
DOUBLEDAY, DORAN AND COMPANY, INC.

1928



COPYRIGHT, 1928, BY DOUBLEDAY, DORAN
& COMPANY, INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.
PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES AT THE
COUNTRY LIFE PRESS, GARDEN CITY, N. Y.

FIRST EDITION

TO
JAMES WELCH
THE KINDEST OF
FRIENDS



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2023 with funding from
Kahle/Austin Foundation

PREFACE

THIS story is written around the scenes and folk of the Yorkshire village which I knew so well as a boy, and in which I spent those years wherein a boy receives sharply defined impressions that last for ever. It was in the early 'seventies that I first knew it; when I last visited it, two years ago, I found no change in it, or in its people. It sounds almost incredible that there should be such changelessness in these changing times, but there are many out-of-the-way villages and hamlets in England in which Time seems to have stood still. In this particular village, which has a history going back to pre-Norman times, whose old church and old mill were both there when William the Conqueror came to these shores, the folk are pretty much what their great-great-grandfathers were, thinking, talking, acting as their forbears did, true children of the soil who are content to come and go, knowing that they will leave no trace, beyond a line or two carved on some humble stone in the village churchyard. Their true kinship is with the things around them—the soil, the woods, the gray stones, the red roofs. Yet they have their loves, their hates, their joys, their sorrows, some have even their small ambitions. Still, virtually nothing changes. Nothing could better exemplify the

true character of a village like this than the fact that in outward appearance it is in this year of grace 1928 precisely what it was in the year of Waterloo, unless it be the other fact that the names in the parish registers to-day are the names of folks who have always been there since the parish registers began in 1538. The man who follows the plough there to-day is the direct descendant of the man who followed the plough there in the times of the Tudors—each bears the same name. Outside the parish boundaries many things take place—here nothing happens, except that a man is born, a maid marries, an old woman lays aside her knitting and dies. The atmosphere is that of silent afternoon. Yet, somehow, it is in the silence, the unchanging aspect, the uneventfulness of these English villages that the true strength of England lies. The world moves, not always in the right direction, but these children of the soil are truly *semper eadem*. And to be the same for ever and ever has its great meaning.

J. S. FLETCHER.

Contents

PART THE FIRST
THE TEARS OF AUTUMN
Page 3

PART THE SECOND
THE FOWLER'S NET
Page 95

PART THE THIRD
THE PINNING-FEE
Page 239

PART THE FIRST
THE TEARS OF AUTUMN

I

AT WHAT was in local parlance called the Down-Town of the village, there stood, grouped round an irregular knoll, connected on one side by a short-necked promontory with a high tree-crowned ridge above it, a cluster of cottages and dwellings immeasurably poorer and meaner than those of the more important and larger part beyond the cross-roads. The distinction between these two parts was as marked as that between Mayfair and Whitechapel, as between the material luxury of the West and the prevalent poverty of the East. Up-Town, which meant all beyond the cross-roads and the old-fashioned hostelry that stood at one of its corners, possessed everything of consequence in the village. Within its area stood the church, the vicarage, and the school, the great Hall, and the four principal farmsteads with their rich orchards, their high-roofed barns, and their bursting granaries; there, too, the cottages were better and newer; there, too, was the general shop and the wheelwright's yard with its lofty stacks of seasoning timber. Down-Town had nothing of all this rustic grandeur, this significance and potentiality of wealth; between it and the cross-roads stood the village smithy, but it

was placed in an isolated position, as if, knowing that it was shut off from the greater things above, its builders had wished to show their disdain of the poorer things below. Down-Town's one possession, other than the red-tiled, grey-walled cottages, which clustered together like frightened things before a common enemy, was the conventicle of the village, a small, four-square building, as ugly outside as it was poor and colourless within. Naturally, it being in their midst, the Down-Towners went to it on Sundays and to its one week-night service—its drab walls, hard unbacked benches, and bare floor typified and fitted in with their lives.

Anyone who might have wished to gain a general impression of the community which inhabited Down-Town could have done so by attending one of the Sunday afternoon services in the little chapel, when the Down-Towners, old and young alike, gathered within it to hear the Good Book read (they never referred to it as the Bible or Holy Scripture), to sing hymns of a doleful sort without any instrumental accompaniment, and to listen to sermons preached by men of their own class, or of a class little superior to theirs, in which there was far more talk of Divine Justice than of Divine Love. The poor attempts at a little Sunday bravery, the man's black coat, made for his father's wedding many a long year before, and now worn irrespective of fit; the woman's faded cloak or cape, the cast-off of some farmer's wife; the little girl's clean pinafore,

too often concealing the much darned and patched frock beneath; the small boy's clean frill or collar, whose virgin whiteness drew off attention from his ragged jacket: all these things, with the extra Sunday soaping which the old faces and the young cheeks had received, bore a pathetic testimony to the poverty of these folk and to their simple desire to mark the difference between one day of the seven and the other six. Their attention to the service indicated the patience of the life of the fields amidst which they lived; there was something ox-like, sheep-like, in the way in which they sat, gnarled hands placed flat on knees, red and coarsened hands folded together under shawl or cloak, as brother Such-an-One in the little pulpit read the Good Book and thundered forth his rude conception of truth. They looked at him as over-worked beasts of burden look at their taskmasters—an acute observer would have said that the prevalent expression of face and eye was a dull acceptance of Destiny.

To those in that place (of whom there were a few) Down-Town and its folk were of much more interest than Up-Town and its more pretentious inhabitants. To begin with, Down-Town, as a cluster of human dwellings, had artistic possibilities which were as good as its house accommodation, sanitation, and modern essentials were hopelessly bad. There was scarcely a roof that ran in line with another roof; scarcely a chimney-stack that stood straight; scarcely a cottage that did not seem as

if it could make up its mind to fall over to the right or the left, backward or forward. There were quaint nooks and corners in which bright bits of garden, gay in spring with common flowers, were found; there was a curious draw-well, enclosed on three sides by an ancient and crumbling stone wall, covered here and there with ivy and snap-dragon, at which the women used to gossip. There were queer little walks, or, as the Down-Town folk called them, ginnels, between the houses, paved with the liver-stones in which the surrounding fields were thick, and, on the borders of these, never more than a foot wide, gilly-flowers and sweet-williams grew, with primroses and candy-tuft. There were windows set in the walls and gables, so small, so deeply embra-sured that the interiors within were caverns of gloom; the glass of these windows, made in small panes fixed in lead, was of a deep green in colour and an extraordinary thickness. Wherever one strayed in Down-Town one found the possibility of a picture; always, rising high above the tumble-down cottages, rose the great ash trees which made the place a landmark from a long way off across the surrounding fields; always, keeping guard over the red roofs, the great row of elms which crowned the ridge above stood like a guard of honour over it, presenting arms.

But like many another English village of that time and type, Down-Town was more beautiful without than within. There was not a cottage with a boarded

floor; if the floor was not of square red tiles it was of squares of flagstones. When the weather was damp tiles and flagstones sweated as butter sweats in hot weather. In autumn and winter the damp ran steadily down the walls. Nobody ever papered a wall there; if anybody had possessed the means to do so he or she might just as well have thrown it down the draw-well, for no paper would have stayed on such walls. They were primarily coloured with wash—a nondescript blue-grey, or a yellow ochre; the continual runnings of damp wrought strange devices upon this surface. In the sloping chambers upstairs the floors were of a curious kind of cement, very rough to the feet; scarcely any of the roofs were under-drawn, and folk could lie in bed and watch the stars if they chose, and in the due seasons of the year be rained upon or subjected to a miniature snowstorm, whether they chose or not. The truth was that Down-Town (which, with Up-Town, formed the ancient village of Scarthington) belonged, oddly enough, to practically nobody. All the rest of Scarthington was the property of a gentleman, who looked after it with attention; Down-Town had been a source of wonderment to a good many people for a long time, inasmuch as its rightful owners, for the most part, could not be found, and the papers and particulars relative to it seemed to have disappeared. As regards some of the houses, an attorney's clerk came once a month from the nearest market town and collected rent at the rate

of a shilling a week; others apparently belonged to a little, rusty man in black, who turned up every three months for his money, but whose name nobody knew. But for many of the cottages nobody had paid a penny of rent for years: it was said that this owner had died or gone to America. Those particular rents, too, had been collected by a mysterious agent, whose visits had suddenly ceased. Some of the older people, who clung to Down-Town, fondly believed that this man would just as suddenly reappear and demand his arrears, and they, therefore, put their rent aside in safe hiding places, known only to themselves, so that they might be in readiness for him whenever he came.

The folk who inhabited this cast-out and isolated place were as interesting as the place itself. They were nearly all associated with the labour of the fields, and a considerable number of the older ones were in receipt of parish relief. Some of them, especially amongst the women, were of great age. Henny Simpson, who never made any further pilgrimage than that from her bed in the corner to her chair by the fire, had no idea of how old she was, but she could remember the time when the press-gangs used to come into the village; when the carts and horses of the farmers were stamped with the letters G.R., and the broad arrow, in case they should be wanted for use in the event of Napoleon Bonaparte's threatened invasion; and when beacons were set up on the neighbouring eminences in case that invasion took

place. She remembered hearing people talk about Nelson and the battle of Trafalgar; she was a grown woman, and married, when the news of Waterloo came. She remembered the last of the wise men to dwell in those parts—a man who, by charms and spells, could get butter to come when churn and cream were refractory, who could cure various aches and pains by writing words on bits of paper, who could make a young man love a girl, whether he wanted to or not, and who had the reputation of being in league with the Devil, whom the Down-Town people always spoke of as the Old Lad. She remembered these things much more clearly than she remembered the events of later years.

In a cottage which was little more than a miserable shed, and was furnished with the barest appliances, lived a man whose father had been one of the most prosperous farmers in the neighbourhood. This man, Hosea Yardsworth, was possessed of more than ordinary parts; he was sharp, shrewd, intelligent, and had read. But he had in his youth no taste for the hum-drum life of the fields; he wanted to go away and see London and London life and gaiety. His father articted him to a London attorney, and, for a time, Hosea used to visit the old homestead in all the grandeur of London clothes and the assurance of London manners. Then, for years, nothing was heard or seen of him. The old man died, and his other son, Samuel, took over the farm. Samuel was a confirmed drunkard; in a few

years he had drunk himself into his grave. Just then Hosea turned up—a broken-down man, but still with something of his old smartness in him. There was nothing left for him, and now, living in this poor hovel, he gained a precarious living as an odd-job man, with no other recreation than reading the fly-blown, beer-stained newspaper in the kitchen of the Plough and Harrow to men who could not read it for themselves.

Very near to Hosea lived a curious couple, known to all the countryside by no other names than Tin Tom and Tin Tom's missis. They came into Down-Town and the district from no one knew where. A mile away across the land there was an old quarry which had not been worked for a good many years. One morning found a man, a woman and a child or two, discovered in this quarry in company with a tilt-covered cart and a miserable pony. The man was making tins for all he was worth; when he had finished a supply the woman put them in a basket and went out to sell them. In the quarry they remained for over a week; then, hearing that there were houses in Down-Town which nobody seemed to claim, they one night entered an empty one and settled down. There they stayed and became institutions. They were queer people. Few of their neighbours ever saw Tin Tom; everybody knew Tin Tom's missis, a great, gaunt grenadier of a woman, who marched from village to village in all weathers, carrying her tins. Once came the inconvenience of

twins: she strapped both, Esquimaux fashion, on her back, and went out with her tin-basket as before.

Next door to these people lived another couple whose lives were somewhat out of the common. The man, known to all the village since boyhood as Stump Dick, because one of his legs was shorter than the other, and who was further characterized by hideous scars, the result of burns, and a villainous squint, was a breaker of stones on the highway, and until at least his fortieth year had lived a lonely life in his cottage, at any rate since the death of his mother, which occurred when he was quite a young man. Nobody ever cooked for him; nobody tidied up for him. With the exception of a disreputable looking cur which had somehow or other attached itself to his fortunes and sat with him by his stone-heap by day and by his hearth at night, he had no companions. Then suddenly a woman appeared in Stump Dick's establishment, and stayed there. She was a careworn, travel-stained woman, who had once been handsome; the Down-Town folk who had speech of her said that she spoke like the quality. In point of fact she was a poor, world-weary creature, whom the lonely man had found starving and homeless on the highway one bitter night in winter and had taken in and fed. And from that point onwards, in spite of all conventions, Stump Dick and the dog had another companion.

There were many other grey-lifed people in Down-Town. There were widow-women, some of

them old, some young, left sometimes with children, sometimes without, to fend for themselves. The more favoured found charing jobs and washing-days at the farmsteads; the less favoured worked in the fields until they became bent, twisted, gnarled, furrowed of face, brown of skin, as if they had been stained with walnut juice. To see these poor creatures, swathed about with old odds and ends of clothing and remnants of what was once good sacking, grubbing on their knees at the potato-pile in dreary weather was to see a tragedy of the unavoidable, a necessary consequence of God, man, and the red soil. Then there were old men, castaways of the ceaseless battle between man and the earth, from which he tears his sustenance with such groans and endeavour, who from long exposure to rain and sleet and wind and snow, were crippled with rheumatism and, past all labour, could only sit by the stick fires in the cold months, or hobble to the open doors when the sun shone. For all the people, old or young, there was one fate—labour. The men worked; the women worked; the children worked soon after they walked. The primal curse lay upon all; a thing never to be lifted until they were carried to the churchyard for good.

In this small community there were two families a little in advance of all the rest, inasmuch as they were slightly better off. One consisted of only two members—an old market-gardener named Thomas Green and his daughter Rebecca, a young woman

who at this time was twenty-two years of age. Most of the people in Down-Town had soubriquets—Thomas Green was known as Old Wellington, because of his resemblance to the hero of Waterloo, cheap pictures of whom were in many countryside cottages at that time. A tall, gaunt, clean-shaven man, with a fine head of silvery hair (he was now over sixty), a big nose and a blue eye, he was all the more noticeable because he invariably dressed in old-fashioned tail-coats, smalls, and grey stockings, and wore a high-top hat, of all of which he seemed to have an inexhaustible supply. His business was to grow vegetables in a small plot of ground attached to his cottage, and to take them to the neighbouring market town in an old-fashioned cart, drawn by a donkey which was almost as much a celebrity as Old Wellington himself.

As for the superiority of the other family, the Lamberts, it lay in the fact that the father, Joseph Lambert, known as Old Dosey, and the son, Michael, worked at the principal farmstead in Up-Town and were in receipt of better wages than any of the labourers in Down-Town. Old Dosey was, at this time, about fifty-eight years of age, to all appearance a hale and hearty man who belied his nick-name; his wife, Miriam, had for some years been bed-ridden, and was therefore unable to attend to any domestic duties. These were chiefly performed by an elder daughter, Keziah, a hard-featured, keen-eyed woman of thirty, who had the

reputation of being the most managing housekeeper and the sharpest-tongued shrew within ten miles. Michael, a stoutly fashioned, good-looking young man of twenty-five, a shepherd by calling—his father being a ploughman and general labourer—was the most likely man of his age in Down-Town, having certain ambitions and taking some pride in his appearance. There was a fourth member of this family, a second daughter, who bore the uncommon name of Mia. She was barely eighteen, and was universally acknowledged to be the prettiest girl of the village.

II

THE folk of Down-Town being early risers at all periods of the year, went to bed at a time when townspeople of the gayer and livelier sort are seriously beginning what means to them the chief business of the day. By eight o'clock in winter (that being taken to express a good half of the year) and nine in summer (that signifying the other half) almost every one of the small lamps or the thin tallow candles which gave light to the lower rooms of the cottages had gone out and there was nothing to shine in the windows but the last gleam of the dying fires. No one ever saw a light in the upper chambers, unless in cases of sickness—Down-Town went to bed in the dark just as it rose in the dark; it had no need nor the appliances for making elaborate toilets. And so, long before midnight, everything under the ash trees and the elms was very still.

But sometimes a light shone in a cottage window later than usual, and for ordinary causes, and it was only because she particularly wished to finish some sewing one night in early autumn that Rebecca Green kept the lamp burning in her father's cottage until nine o'clock. Like all the rest of Down-Town lamps it gave but little illumination and spread only a circumscribed halo over the deal table on which it stood and the needlework in Rebecca's hands, and

on Rebecca's placid, homely face, her quiet brown eyes, and her plainly arranged hair. But its glow attracted the notice of a man coming along the road from the open country, and after hesitating a moment he turned aside and climbing the little stone-paved ginnel tapped gently at the Greens' door. He heard Rebecca's light step coming over the red tiles; then a door opened and Rebecca, holding the lamp over her head, looked out on the visitor.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"It's me, 'Becca—Tom Foulds," said the man, speaking in the low tones which country folk always use in the hush of night. "I see'd the light in the windows, and so I just stepped up to see if your father were in."

"Father's been in his bed an hour," answered Rebecca.

"Well, I can tell you," said the visitor. "Ye see, I had occasion to go over to Wheaton to-night, and of course I went into the Dog-and-Fox to have my pint, like, and I chanced to hear that your father's donkey is in Wheaton pound—in the pinfold, you'll understand. Leastways, from all descriptions I should say it were your father's ass—it's a lighter one in colour than ordinary, this here that I'm talking about, and its cross is blacker than usual. That's what they said at the Dog-and-Fox, anyway."

"Yes, that's Neddy," said Rebecca. "I wish you could have brought him with you, Thomas."

Thomas Foulds scratched his head.

"Why, now," he said, "if it had been earlier on, like, that's just what I would ha' done, 'Becca, and wi' pleasure. But ye see, that there pinfold at Wheaton's a good mile from the Dog-and-Fox, and then I didn't know where the pinder lived, and besides that I'd next to no brass in my pocket. And them pinders, they will not let stray animals out until they have the brass delivered up for them. That's the law, ye see—money before liberation."

"Yes, I know," answered 'Becca. "Well, thank you kindly, Thomas—father'll be rare and glad to know where Neddy is, and we'll send for him in the morning. Good-night, Thomas."

Thomas Foulds said good-night with more expressions of regret at his inability to bring the strayed donkey home in ignominy, and went off heavily down the hill. When he had gone Rebecca took the lamp back to the table and returning to the door gazed in the direction of the cottage where the Lamberts lived. There was a light in one of the lower windows.

"Michael's up," she said. "He'll go, early in the morning."

She turned back into the living room, took some silver from a tea-cup at the back of the cupboard, and throwing a shawl over her shoulders ran out into the gloom in the direction of the Lamberts' cottage. A moment later she was tapping gently at the thick glass.

The casement opened quickly—Michael Lam-

bert's head showed itself silhouetted against the light within.

"'Becca!" he exclaimed. "Is it aught wrong, lass?"

"No, Michael," she answered, "but Thomas Foulds has just been to say that Neddy's in the pinfold at Wheaton, and I thought perhaps you wouldn't mind getting up a bit earlier in the morning and fetching him?"

"For sure I will, my lass," answered Michael. "I'll borrow Tin Tom's pony and ride over as soon as it's light—happen before."

Rebecca thrust the money through the window.

"Foulds said there'd be money to pay, Michael," she said. "There's five shillings—will that do?"

"Aye, and more than do, lass!" replied Michael, waving the money back. "I'll pay, and your father can pay me. And so the old stick-i'-the-mud's in the pinfold, is he? Ha-ha, I'll talk to him!"

"It's good of you to go, Michael," she said, stepping back.

"There's naught in the world I wouldn't do for thee, my lass," said Michael.

With a sudden impulse she came close to the window and let it frame her face—Michael kissed her.

"God bless my little lass!" he said.

Rebecca faded away into the night. Above her the starry skies seemed suddenly to have assumed the radiance of a summer's morning.

III

WHEN Michael awoke next morning the grey dawn was already stealing through the little window at which Rebecca had tapped only a few hours before. Suddenly remembering the mission with which she had charged him he rose and dressed hastily, intending to make himself a cup of tea before starting out on his journey to the neighbouring village. But before his simple toilet was completed he heard sounds in the living-room, which was next to his own sleeping-chamber, and on opening his door he saw that his elder sister, Keziah, was already up and busied at the hearth.

"If I'd been a few minutes sooner, I'd ha' done that for you, Keziah," he said. "I'm up earlier than usual this morning, you see."

"An' what for, pray?" enquired Keziah, who was making dust and ashes fly out of the grate. "It's not oft that you bestir yourself before your time, so far as I know."

"I'm going over to Wheaton," answered Michael. "Old Wellington's donkey's strayed away, and Tom Foulds says it's in Wheaton pinfold, so I'm going to fetch it."

"Wheaton's a good two mile off," observed

Keziah, "and you'll be late for your work. Why doesn't Old Wellington fetch his own beast, or send 'Becca for it? they've naught else to do. I've no patience wi' folks who's for ever wanting somebody else's help. Nobody ever gives me no help. I asked Mia to bring in some kindling wood last night and there isn't a stick on the oven top."

Michael made no answer to this. Believing in deeds more than in words he went into the lean-to shed at the rear of the cottage and presently came back with a wisp of straw and an armful of kindling wood, part of a pile which he himself had chopped the previous Saturday afternoon when he had come home from work earlier than usual. Taking advantage of Keziah's going out with a scuttleful of ashes he knelt down at the grate and busied himself in making the fire, which quickly began to crackle and sputter. When he had put more wood and coals on it Michael went over to the well for fresh water and, filling the kettle, put it on the hob.

"I would like a cup of tea before I set off," he remarked. "It's getting coldish of a morning now."

"Then you'll have to wait till it's time to make some for mother," said Keziah snappishly. "She always wants some when she wakes, and she'll none be awake just yet, 'cause she's had a poorish night. I can't afford to make two lots o' tea, so now!"

"Never mind," said Michael. "I'll have a drink of milk and a bit of bread to stay my stomach."

"Then you'll have to buy a pen'north of milk as

you come back," said Keziah, "or else there'll be none for your breakfast. An' I wish folk would get their meals at proper times instead of eating and drinking in between—it's hard enough work to keep house at all without having arrangements upset in that way, and you an' Mia's always in that larder."

Michael might have replied that he contributed largely to the family exchequer, but he knew from long experience that it was useless to enter into any argument with his older sister, who had a trick of securing the last word, so he merely answered that he would bring in another pint, and going into the larder filled a tin cup with milk and cut himself a hunch of bread, upon which, Keziah not looking, he laid a substantial slice of cold bacon. And having drunk off the milk he went out into the street, munching his bacon and bread, and made his way to Tin Tom's cottage.

The tinman had just opened the door of his dwelling and was lounging against the post, smoking a short and very black clay pipe. He gave Michael a good morning in an accent that was derived from no part of the North Country—that accent made Tin Tom a foreigner, or at any rate a Southerner, to the folk amongst whom he had pitched his tent.

"Morning," responded Michael. "I came round to see if you'd be kind enough to lend me that pony o' yours. Mestur Green's ass has strayed away to Wheaton yonder, and the old man's wanting it this morning to go to market with."

"You can have the pony with pleasure, young man," answered the tinker, who was noted for his friendliness to his neighbours. "And if there was a saddle to put on him you'd be welcome to that, too. Only there isn't."

Michael replied that a saddle made no difference, and going back to his own cottage he fetched a sack and a saddle-girth, and having strapped the former over the pony's back, which was none too plump, he mounted it and set off along the road to Wheaton at such speed as his animal was capable of. He had by this time eaten his hunch of bread and slice of bacon, and had filled and lighted a short clay pipe, the bowl of which, after much endeavour, he had succeeded in colouring to the tint of coal. Blue and fragrant clouds rose from it as Michael ambled along on the tinman's pony—they were no lighter than Michael's heart. By nature he was of a cheerful and sanguine disposition, good-tempered and fun-loving, and he had always, from boyhood, been characterized by a disposition to oblige anybody, in all these matters being the direct opposite to his sister Keziah, who was for ever in an irascible temper and cultivated bitterness of tongue and manner. For her Michael did many things, for which he was never thanked; he would have done them all the same, thanks or no thanks. He expected no thanks for fetching the old market-gardener's donkey from its temporary prison—it was enough for him to have the privilege of doing something for Rebecca. That made his heart

lightsome, but his dreams of things to come were lighter still. By the end of the year he would have saved a certain amount of money on which he had set his heart, and that accomplished he and Rebecca could be married, and then, well, then he meant to take a step which he had had in contemplation for some time.

When he rode into Wheaton, Michael, being infinitely practical, went first to the village pound, to see if Thomas Green's donkey was really there. The pound stood at the head of a narrow lane which led to the church—it abutted, in fact, on the lych-gate of the churchyard. It was a picturesque prison, and in keeping with its surroundings. On the slope above it stood the old church, square-towered, high of roof, reminiscent inside and out of the centuries immediately succeeding the Norman Conquest. There was a great yew tree before the west door; on the north side of the chancel rose a clump of beech trees, whose leaves were turning brown. On the slope between the church and the lych-gate were many tombstones and monuments—crosses, pillars, slabs of all sorts, most of them inclining at strange angles and all covered with grey or green lichen. Some of these graves were neglected; some cared for; one or two, on which no tombstone had yet been placed, were decorated with flowers which had already begun to fade. Michael, though he had so far been too busy in life to do more than feel things, was vaguely conscious that this was a scene of much charm and of

infinite peace, as all village churchyards should be.

Nevertheless, despite its picturesque surroundings, the pinfold was a prison. In fact, its immediate surroundings were eminently suggestive of various forms of punishment. Against the wall which separated it from the lane stood the remains of the village stocks—there was the stone seat on which the wrong-doers sat, and there the now-ruinous oaken beams in which their feet were confined. Close by, firmly wedged in the ground, and considering its great age, little worn by time or weather, stood a stout column of oak which had been used as a whipping-post by long-dead constables and folk in authority. Authority was further in evidence in the presence of a great padlock which secured the door of the pinfold.

Michael edged his pony up to the walls of the prison and looked over. The strayed donkey stood knee-deep in nettles and docks; its head hung low, and it looked disconsolate. The interior of the pinfold, indeed, was not too inviting to sheep, cow, ass, or horse, for it was thickly overgrown with weeds and afforded no sustenance. There were evidences, however, that Old Wellington's donkey had had hospitality offered it in the shape of hay, and Michael knew, of course, that that would make a difference in its bill, just as the offer of a glass of sherry by a polite host means an additional shilling in some obscure item of his charges.

An old man, going to his labour on the wayside, told Michael where the pinder lived, but that person, when Michael arrived at his cottage, was still in bed, and as he lived by himself and had no particular reason for rising early, the donkey's ransomer had to knock several times at door and window before an upper casement was thrown open and an ancient countenance, topped by a flannel nightcap, looked out upon him.

"You've got Master Green o' Scarthington's donkey in your pinfold," said Michael, in answer to a somewhat petulant enquiry as to the reason of his summons. "I've come to fetch it."

"And what d'ye want to come at this time for?" enquired the pinder irritably. "'Tisn't six o'clock yet."

"I know, mister," replied Michael, "but ye see I have to go to my work. There's no call for you to come out. You can give me the key and I'll pay you the money."

The old man in the flannel nightcap muttered something about knowing his duties and bade him wait. In a few minutes he appeared at the cottage door, hastily clothed and carrying a large key, with which he motioned in the direction of the pinfold.

"My bounden duty is not to allow this here key to pass out o' my possession, young man," he said. "That's the law, d'ye see, and the law must be obeyed. So that there ass is Thomas Green's, is it?"

Well, now, if I'd known it were Thomas Green's, and I could ha' done it unbeknown like, or if I weren't pinder, which I am, I'd ha' put it in my own shed for the night. But the law is the law, d'ye see?"

"Oh, it's right enough, is that!" agreed Michael.

"What the law says is this here," continued the pinder, "if any beast, which is horses, and cattle, and sheep, pigs, mules, donkeys, and such-like comes a-straying into our parish without lawful business, well, I locks 'em up in the name of the law. And when I locks ought up in my pinfold, young man, there's no getting out until what they call the uttermost farthing is paid."

"Oh, of course, I'll pay for the beast all right," said Michael, who took this remark as a direct request for cash. "I never meant no other—Mister Green'll pay me."

"There were a small matter of hay that I gave the creatur," said the pinder, as he unlocked the door. "Howsomever, happen Thomas Green'll leave a few of potatoes, or happen a few of onions or carrots at my door when he's passing next time, so we'll say naught about it. That'll be right, young man, and now the captive is free and you can depart with him, and I hope you'll never get into no pin-folds yourself."

Michael, who had been fastening a halter round the delinquent's neck, stared at the pinder.

"Eh?" he said blankly.

"It's none all donkeys and sheep and such-like that

get into pinfolds," said the old man, chuckling and wheezing at his own joke. "It's folksees and all! Some never gets out—never gets out—no!"

Then, clutching the silver which Michael had given him in answer to his lawful demands, he shuffled away, leaving the young man, the pony, and the rescued ass to make a hurried return to their own village.

IV

FROM the time he was twelve years old (and for four years before that in harvest-time) Michael had been employed on the farm on which his father had also spent nearly the whole of his life as a labourer. Beginning his experience of pastoral pursuits by driving the carts, helping to take up the corn (for this was before the days of the self-binding reaping machines) and doing odd jobs during the harvest month, Michael, on definitely entering the world of rural labour, passed through its usual initial stages and learnt to follow a harrow and to guide a plough. But before he was out of his teens, chiefly because he had observed certain things and had formed conclusions for himself, he began, with his master's approval, to give his attention entirely to the care of sheep, and at twenty was known as one of the most accomplished shepherds in the neighbourhood. It was not a usual thing in those parts for so young a man to go in for shepherding, but Mr. Henry Truscott, the employer of the two Lamberts, had long perceived that Michael had a natural genius for the work, and he not only confided the whole of his flocks to his charge, but took him with him when he went to the various sheep-fairs to purchase new stock. On these occasions Michael kept eyes and

ears wide open, that he might learn all he could—he had no wish to be a mere feeder of sheep, but a shepherd fully acquainted with all the niceties of breeding and rearing. The result of his care and perseverance in this way was that Mr. Truscott's sideboard was already ornamented by various silver cups, and that Michael's pockets were usually the heavier by a few sovereigns when he and his master returned from the shows to which they took their pedigree sheep just before Christmas in each year.

The flock to which Michael repaired after he had restored the stray donkey to Thomas Green and eaten his breakfast was netted out on a turnip field, which lay on the upper slopes of a long, wind-swept hillside that lay on the outer edge of the village. It was a bleak and exposed situation in cold weather, for there was no cover beyond a solitary coppice on the brow of the hill and the remains of an old sheepfold, which had long tumbled down and was now nothing but a heap of stones and timber. There was a chilly wind blowing along the unprotected slopes as Michael, covered by an old overcoat which was secured to his neck and shoulders by the simple process of fastening the top button—the sleeves being unused and dangling at the wearer's side like the flappers of a penguin—and carrying his dinner-basket, came upon the scene of his long day's labour. Ripples of wind ran along the surface of the yet undisturbed turnips, whose leaves were faded from green to yellow; little gusts of it stirred the fleeces

of the sheep within the nets; it had just sufficient sting in it to turn fingers and cheeks to a blue-red. The boy, who was Michael's assistant, and who was already pulling turnips for the sheep's breakfast, turned a ruddy face to him; the wind ruffled the tow-coloured hair which escaped from under his ancient cap.

Michael divested himself of his old overcoat, in size and weight as heavy as a dragoon's cloak, wrapped it around his dinner-basket, and placed the two in a corner of the ruinous sheep-fold. Then he turned to his day's work, recking little of what many would have thought of—the long, dreary monotony of it. The day would have its usual round. There were turnips to be dressed and chopped; the troughs to be filled; sickly or lame sheep to be looked to; the master would make his forenoon visit, and he and Michael would inspect the latter's charges, and discuss and comment; the master would go away; nothing but the grey skies above, the damp-clinging earth below, the eating and bleating sheep, the leaves of the turnips shaking in the wind would remain. A rook or two might flap across the sky; there might be a shot from the coppice; perhaps the gamekeeper and his dog might pass by and exchange a word; but for the most part of the day there would be work and monotony. The very surroundings were monotonous. At the foot of the uplands on which Michael was placed as on an eminence, a sluggish stream meandered between alders and wil-

lows; beyond it level meadows stretched away to far-off woods; in their midst a village spire rose from a setting of farmstead and orchard. Over this landscape in autumn and winter there usually hung an almost impalpable curtain of grey mist; at that time of the year, too, the skies were usually grey; it was seldom that a bright sun shone across the land. And save for the occasional sounds of country life the brown and green acres were very quiet.

Here, at that time, Michael and the boy and the sheep-dog, which Michael just then possessed, went through the round of the day. Michael performed his tasks in silence, scarcely ever speaking except to direct his assistant; the boy sang snatches of ballads learnt at the fireside, or songs picked up at the last statute-hiring fair; the dog, having little to do with penned and netted sheep, took a languid interest in the day's doings and spent most of his time curled up near the turnip-chopper or fast asleep by Michael's coat in the old sheep-fold.

In the next field to that in which Michael tended his sheep, another young man of about his own age went steadily from headland to headland throughout the morning in the rear of two slowly moving horses and a plough. His labours were perhaps even more monotonous than Michael's. Up one furrow, down the next—this over and over again. On one side of him the field was all stubble; on the other, which his plough had already traversed, it was straight, uniform ridges of shiny brown soil in which the rooks

stalked musingly, picking up such grubs, insects, and worms as the blade of the plough had unearthed. Horses and man kept up the same steady, unvarying pace, hour after hour. Now and then the man stopped to wipe off the clinging soil from the plough-share; now and then, at one of the headlands, he gave his beasts a breathing space. But as nine and ten and eleven passed the stubble grew less and the newly ploughed grew more, until the field was a yellow-green on one side and a red-brown on the other. As the clock in the church tower, half-a-mile away, sent the sound of twelve strokes ringing along the wind, the ploughman, who had just reached the headland next to the sheep-field, released his horses from the plough and, leading them to the protected side of the coppice, threw them a bundle of hay and turned away to the old sheep-fold. Michael, at the same moment, came across from his nets, followed by the dog, now wide-awake on the chance of catching scraps of food. The boy who lived in a cottage at the foot of the slope, departed dinnerwards, whistling merrily. As for the sheep, they stood in straight rows on either side of the troughs, feeding steadily and as one.

"Well, Michael, my lad," said the ploughman, as the shepherd approached. "Time for a bit of summat to eat and drink, like, what? It's a rawish morning," he added, looking round reflectively. "I could ha' thought we should ha' felt rain before now."

"Too much wind, Reuben," answered Michael.

"Let's get out of it for a piece, then," said Reuben, entering the old sheep-fold and picking up his overcoat, which, with his dinner-basket, lay near Michael's. "I've had plenty o' blow this morning—it's the bleakest bit of land on all our farm is this."

Like Reuben, Michael assumed his overcoat, putting it on in the approved regulation fashion which he had followed as he came to his work, and both sat down with their backs to the wall and opened their dinner-baskets. Each basket held precisely the same provision—a great hunch of bread, a wedge of very fat cold boiled bacon, and an apple pie, baked in a dish. Each used the same adjunct to eating—a formidable-looking clasp knife, which could be employed in carving the bread and bacon into solid cubes, or the double-crust ed apple pie into slices. Their drink was similar, cold tea, kept in tin bottles and sweetened, but without milk—an ideal beverage for an al fresco lunch if bottled when freshly made.

Neither man spoke much as he ate and drank; it was the custom in those parts to preserve a respectable silence at meal-times, and the habit of it stuck, even if you ate your dinner or did your drinking in a hedge-bottom or behind a wall. But when they had finished and had fastened up their dinner-baskets and lighted their pipes, they were ready for converse, and all the more so because since Reuben Gaunt's

coming to the village, two years before, he and Michael had become very particular friends.

"Thought any more of what you're going to do at Martinmas, Reuben?" asked Michael, as he threw the last scrap of what he had spared from his dinner to the sheep-dog. "Stopping again, or what?"

Reuben nodded his head and rubbed his chin reflectively with the back of his great hand.

"Well, I reckon I shall, Michael, lad," he said. "Our gaffer, he came to me yesterday, when I was ploughing there in the Eight-Acre, and said he was very well satisfied wi' me, and if I was satisfied wi' him he'd raise me three pounds for this year. And it's none a bad place, Michael—as good as ever I been in—and then, of course, atween you and me, I don't want to go far away from Mia."

Michael nodded his head. He knew that Reuben had been in love with Mia ever since his arrival in Scarthington, and that lately they had been keeping company.

"Ye see," continued Reuben. "I thought that if I stopped on another year and saved a bit more, me and Mia could wed then——"

Michael started and stared at his friend.

"Eh, lad!" he exclaimed. "Why, Mia's naught but a bairn yet. Give her a bit o' time!"

"She's going in eighteen," said Reuben. "I've heard my own mother say that she were wed at that age."

"Aye, Mia's going in eighteen," said Michael,

"but she were only seventeen in summer. I'd liefer see the lass wed you nor anybody I know on, Reuben, but don't get wed over soon. Look at some o' them that does—Ben Hopkinson and his lot, now!—gow, if I were a lass and saw what some o' them early marriages comes to I wouldn't be for wedding at all."

"Well, say a couple o' years, then," said Reuben with obvious reluctance. "Of course, Mia is young. But ye know, Michael, I'm none of th' Ben Hopkinson sort—the public'll none see much o' my brass, I can tell you—what I want to ware I'll ware on summat that'll last, like house furniture. And I shall take care o' Mia. I've a bit o' notion above the Hopkinson lot," he concluded with a touch of pride.

"Aye, lad, we've both got that," responded Michael. "But there's one thing that a man can't control, Reuben, in our walk o' life, unless he strikes out a bit for himself."

"Well, an' what's that?" asked Reuben.

"Wages," replied Michael laconically. "You're better off now than you ever will be in all your life, Reuben, if you wed and settle down as a labourer."

Reuben shifted uneasily in his seat against the wall and frowned a little.

"Look at it," continued Michael. "Here you are in a good place, with plenty to eat and a comfortable roof over your head, good clothes and a nice bit o' money in the bank. Well, you leave to get wed and you spend your savings in furnishing your

cottage and such-like. Then, because you're a wed man, you've got to work as an outdoor labourer. Eighteen shillings a week, Reuben, and no higher. And then the children begin coming. A man's a deal better off single."

Reuben's naturally cheery face grew long.

"Aye, it's all right, is that, Michael. We all know that a chap as lives in is better off nor one as lives out," he said. "But then, ye know—why, dang it all, a chap's gotten to wed some time—it's the nat'-ral thing to do. And," he continued, his face brightening, "I don't aim at being a labourer all my time—I'll be a bit better nor that. I can do wi' a better sort o' life nor a labourer's, Michael."

Michael was staring absent-mindedly at the valley below them, seen through a gap in the broken-down wall.

"Aye," he said, "aye! But the thing is how to get out of it. It's like that donkey—when you're once in a pinfold you can't walk out of it just as it pleases you."

As Reuben knew nothing of the escapade of Thomas Green's donkey, this was so much Greek to him, and he stared at Michael questioningly.

"Why, ye look for better things yourself, Michael," he said. "What shall you be for doing when you and 'Becca wed, as I expect ye will be doing before long—of course, you and 'Becca's a deal older nor what me and Mia is—I don't reckon you'll want that shepherding for ever."

"No," replied Michael. "No. I don't want to go on shepherding for ever. I aim at something a bit better, lad."

"What?" asked Reuben.

But Michael made no direct reply.

"What us chaps wants," he said presently, "is to know more. I shall go to the night school again this winter, Reuben——"

"Same here," interjected the ploughman.

"But after all, you don't get to learn a deal there," Michael continued. "And there's more things than writing a plain hand and doing sums up to fractions. I want to see a bit more of the world. And I've got a plan in my head, Reuben, about what I'm going to do."

"Aye, what is it?" asked Reuben, who had a great admiration for his friend and was always interested in his schemes and dreams. "What is it like, Michael?"

"Well, happen we'll emigrate to one of these new countries and start sheep-farming for ourselves," said Michael slowly. "That's what I want, my lad—I want, and I mean, to be my own master."

"That's it—that's it!" exclaimed Reuben enthusiastically. "Dang it, Michael, that's my motto, too. I oft say to myself, 'What's thou doing of, following a plough up and down atween headlands on another man's land—get some land of thy own and work for thyself.' Fact, Michael lad, I've said it many a time."

"What young uns like you and Mia wants to do when you're wed," said Michael, speaking as gravely as if he had been senior to his younger sister and her lover by a good twenty years, "is to emigrate. From all accounts in these papers that you get about it, things is a deal better in places like Canada yonder nor what they are here."

Reuben looked across the wide stretch of landscape, visible through the gap in the wall.

"All the same," he said, "I reckon there's naught like the old country. And the women's none so keen about going out of England, Michael."

"There's naught much to do here, Reuben," said Michael. "Times'll never be what they were. There's my father—he doesn't get what he used to. Mestur Truscott only pays me what he does because I've made myself extra useful to him and know a bit more nor ordinary about sheep. Farming's worse off nor ever. And if the farmers can't make it pay, what about us? Where shall we come in?"

Reuben knew that all this was true. He merely nodded his head and smoked in silence.

"There's over many of us," said Michael. "Some of us'll have to go to these new countries."

"Aye, I reckon so," agreed Reuben. "I'm sure I've no objection if there's more to be made at it. Egow, Michael lad, it 'ud be a fine thing if me and thee and 'Becca and Mia all 'grated to one o' them places, and came back to this old country as rich as

Creeses, as they call him. There's some on 'em would stare—what?"

Michael laughed, and pulling out an enormous and ancient silver watch, remarked that it was just one o'clock. Both men thereupon relinquished their old overcoats, and returned to the leisurely labour of the afternoon; the one to his horses, the other to his sheep.

V

WHILE his son moved hither and thither amongst the sheep on the wind-swept hill-side, Joseph Lambert was busied—after the same leisurely, slow and sure fashion—in thatching in Mr. Truscott's stack-yard down in the village. Harvest had been late that year, and though it was then the third week in October there were still several stacks of both wheat and barley to thatch, which up to then had been protected from the elements by great sheets of tarpaulin. Upon these the elder Lambert had been engaged for the past week; according to his reckoning there were still ten or twelve days' work to be done. As the weeks immediately succeeding harvest are always slack, he took his time in performing his task. Mr. Truscott, he said to himself, and to anybody to whom he spoke of the matter, was not one of those farmers who are forced to thrash their corn as soon as it is reaped; he could afford to let his stacks stand till next spring and summer, if need be, and therefore they must be thatched soundly and well.

Lambert was known all over the countryside as the best thatcher thereabouts. Most men employed in agriculture have some specialty, usually cultivated

from an original liking for the thing they specialize in—one, like Michael, will go in for shepherding; another for hedging and ditching; a third for ploughing; a fourth for the nurture and care of cattle. Lambert prided himself on being an adept at thatching; his chief interest, if by any chance he went abroad into the neighbouring villages, was to look at the stacks he encountered and to estimate their practical and artistic value. Sometimes he learnt something from these critical inspections, but whether he did or not, the fact remained that no other farmer in Scarthington had such well-thatched and smartly finished stacks as those which made a background to Holly Tree Farm. That was because Lambert, being proud of his work, took infinite pains with it. He himself superintended the drawing of thatch on those wet days which will come in harvest, and the dry ones which will come before the corn is quite ready, and he was particular that the straw should be good and of even length. He was particular, too, about his spelks and his tarred thatching band; somebody said of him once that Old Dosey made as many preparations for, and took as much care about, thatching a wheat stack that was to stand six months, as some men did for thatching a cottage that was meant to last for generations.

Why Lambert was called Old Dosey no one could have explained, for although he was then fifty-eight years of age he looked no more than a middle-aged man. He was tall and muscular, like his son; there

was, indeed, a strong resemblance between the two. Each had the same dark, crisp hair, the same blue-grey eyes, the same healthy complexion and strong white teeth; if it had not been that the father's hair was now grizzled, Joseph and Michael might have been taken for elder and younger brother. After close upon half-a-century's toil on the land, old Dosey still retained what most of his fellows had lost—his upright carriage and alert look; he was as quick in his movements as of his eye and did all his work with a resolute cheerfulness and enjoyment. But, as he was fond of saying, he had always had a good master and had never been out of work in his life—he had begun working for old Mr. Truscott when he was ten or eleven years old, had worked for him until the old gentleman died and had then transferred his services to young Mr. Truscott, who was about his own age. From Holly Tree Farm and its four hundred acres of green meadow and brown soil he had never strayed or wished to stray.

Everything in the stackyard that afternoon was very peaceful. There was a thick belt of elms on the windward side of it, and beyond that, across a narrow field, a deep and high wood. The breezes which swept the hillside where Michael shepherded and Reuben ploughed were kept away by these natural shelters from the thatcher. Lambert went steadily on with his task at the top of his ladder; his thatch, his spelks, his tarred band arranged close by him to his convenience; he laid on his thatch, spread,

smoothed, and combed it with the care of the accomplished artist. Round about the foot of the ladder and along the sides of the stacks, thatched and unthatched, fowls, ducks, and geese were searching for the grain that had fallen when the stacks were being made. There, too, were numerous young pigs, occupied in the same fashion, rooting and nosing with grunts of satisfaction whenever a richer deposit than usual was encountered. On the side of the stack-yard, opposite the row of elm trees, lay the orchard; its boughs projected well over the dividing wall and from them the wind had shaken apples—two or three young porkers, wiser or more enterprising than their brethren, had found them and were steadily profiting by the discovery; their curled tails, bleached almost to whiteness, quivered with enjoyment as they crunched.

There was only one idle thing of life in the stack-yard. Curled up on Lambert's old coat near the foot of the ladder, to all appearances asleep, yet keeping a suspicious eye open on the feathered bipeds and the busy pigs, lay the thatcher's dog, a mongrel with a good deal of fox-terrier in him, who had the reputation of being the most faithful beast and the most terrible fighter in all the village. Rejoicing in the possession of a black circular marking, having its left eye as its centre, this dog had been christened Patch—as time went on from his advent into the world of life the name might have been derived from half-a-score places where patches of skin had been

torn out of his body. He was popularly said to have slain over a score of his fellows in fair fight; that he could kill rats by the hundreds if given a chance nobody knew better than himself. He was naturally the character of a swashbuckler, not to say of a professional bravo, in the village, but like all individuals of that sort he had a tender spot in his heart, and was never very far from Lambert's heels either day or night.

The thatcher went on with his work in his slow, thoughtful fashion, never varying its regular processes except to descend the ladder and carry up a fresh bundle of thatch. Beyond the grunting of the revelling pigs, the clucking of the hens, an occasional hiss from an insulted or outraged goose, and a feeble attempt to crow on the part of a young cockerel, there was never a sound to break the afternoon silence, for the children were all in school, and the women were sitting by the wood fires in their cottages. It was, therefore, with something of a start that he suddenly heard a voice hail him from the stackyard gate—the shrill voice of a girl.

“Lambert! your drinking's ready!”

The thatcher paused in his task and pulled out his watch—a watch similar to and as big as that of Michael's.

“All right, my lass!” he replied. “I'd no idee o' th' time.”

However, before descending, he finished laying on the bundle of thatch with which he was then engaged,

and fastened it down. When he arrived at the foot of the ladder the dog greeted him with a joyous bark and vacated the coat which Lambert slowly put on, meanwhile regarding his work with a critical eye. Then, Patch following close at his heels, he went towards the house.

Holly Tree Farm was one of the oldest places in the district—a stone-built house with a tiled roof, most of the outer wall-space covered over with ivy or jessamine. It was a sort of warren of low-ceilinged heavy-raftered rooms and kitchens in its lower storey—the kitchens opened one from another, three in all, the last and inner one being looked upon as a sort of ante-chamber to the glories of the parlour. It was used, indeed, as the family living room, except on Sundays and when company was present, and was accordingly the most comfortable room in the house.

“Go into the gr’et kitchen, Lambert,” said the elder of the two maids whom the thatcher met on entering. “I’ve set your drinking there. The old missis is sitting up to-day, and she wants a word with you.”

Lambert, from long experience, knew what the old missis wanted. She was the widow of his first and the mother of his present employer, and a very old lady, and as often as not she was confined to her chamber upstairs. When she did come downstairs she was very much given to interviewing most of those around her as to the state of their souls, and was apt to put certain questions, which were somewhat

embarrassing. And though the thatcher had a great respect and even affection for her as a relic of the past he remembered with warm feelings, he could not help wishing that the maids had sent him his drinking out into the stackyard.

Old Mrs. Truscott sat in a great hooded chair on the right hand of the hearth, warming her ancient bones at a blazing fire. She was a tall and stately old lady, with a high nose and mild blue eyes; her hands, long, thin, and shapely, lay in calm content upon her gown of black bombazine, silent evidences of a long descent, of which, on occasions, she was somewhat fond of talking. She made a striking yet not a sombre figure, in spite of her black garb. Around her shoulders was draped a mass of soft white lawn, confined below her neck by a great brooch of cairngorm set in silver; on her head was seated a towering fabric, one of the caps of priceless lace for which Mrs. Truscott was famous. There was more of that lace at her wrists, and it might have been renewed thrice a day, and a new cap assumed on each occasion, and there would still have been piles of it left in Mrs. Truscott's rose-and-lavender scented drawers.

When this relic of the past came downstairs she kept a sort of regal state in the great kitchen. If it were any day of the year after the first of September, and before the thirtieth of April, a stirring fire blazed on the open hearth, and a wide-spreading screen, on each panel of which some Scripture sub-

ject was depicted in wool-work, was ranged before the entrance to the ante-chambers. The hooded chair, in which old Mrs. Truscott sat enthroned, was placed between the hearth and the long, low window which looked out upon the flower-garden; it was much padded and protected, and was supplemented by a large hassock, whereon its user's feet, encased in woollen-lined boots, rested and escaped the floor draughts. On its right-hand side stood a small round table with a carved top and spindle legs; upon this lay, in a solemn and mysterious state, which caused the younger branches of the Truscott tree to regard them as superstitious folk regard amulets and charms, the old lady's own particular Bible (there were Bibles in every nook and corner of Holly Tree Farm, the Truscotts being a strict Methodist family), her copy of Wesley's Hymns, her gold-mounted spectacles, a handkerchief scented with lavender water, and a vase filled with whatever flower happened to be in season. With an occasional dip into the Good Book, an occasional reference to the hymnal, and an occasional sniff at the handkerchief or the flowers, the good dame got through the period of sitting in state very well, varied as it was by admonitions and exhortations to all such as came within near approach of her presence.

The thatcher, cap in hand, and closely followed by the faithful Patch, came round the corner of the screen and made a respectful obeisance to his old mistress. His jug of ale and his bread and cheese had

been set out on the table in the middle of the kitchen—no mere regulation allowance of a pint and a hunch, but a foaming jug, a crusty loaf, and an old cheese to go at, for the Truscotts were always noted for their generosity to their dependants, and Lambert was almost as one of themselves.

“Come your ways in, Joseph, and get your drinking,” commanded the old lady. “I understand you’re engaged in thacking, and no doubt it’s a cold day outside.”

“Why, it is a bit windyish, mum,” replied the thatcher, taking a seat and depositing his cap at his feet. “Howsomever, them trees on th’ stackgarth side protects one a bit. Here’s my best respects, mum, and glad to see you’re looking so well.”

“This is one o’ my good days,” said the dame. “Yes—thank the Lord! And how’s your wife, Joseph?”

“Why, mum,” responded Joseph, with a cheek full of bread and cheese, “thanking you kindly, she’s no better and no worse. And, in my opinion, never will be, mum. Them sort of afflictions,” he added reflectively, having consulted his pewter measure, “has to be borne, mum.”

“I hope all’s right with her soul, Joseph,” remarked Mrs. Truscott solemnly.

Joseph crammed more bread and cheese into his mouth, and responded with alacrity, thankful that the old mistress’s enquiry was not directed towards

himself. "I should say it were, mum. I should say it were—we'll hope it is, mum," he said. "There's a powerful lot o' soul-saving been done for her since she was laid on what you might term a couch of pain. She does a deal o' Bible-reading, mum, and says hymns reg'lar, and Mestur Blenkinsop, he comes to pray wi' her reg'lar, too, and then of course there's a deal of tracts left at our cottage both by churchers and chappilers, and the lasses, they read 'em to her of a Sunday afternoon or when they've a bit o' spare time. I heard Keziah reading one t'other day—about them there men as walked through a fire wi' naught to protect 'em and weren't burnt," he concluded reflectively. "Seems a queer thing that, mum, but I reckon things were different i' them Bible days to what these is. I allus did say at there's a deal o' very interesting pieces i' t' Bible, mum."

"And I hope all's right with your soul, Joseph," said Mrs. Truscott, when Joseph paused to take breath and more sustenance.

Joseph breathed very hard.

"And talking about t' Good Book, mum," he went on, "reminds me that there's a good deal about gardens in it, by all accounts, 'cause I can't read misen, as you are aware, and I were talking to the master t'other day about them gooseberry bushes i' t' kitchen garden——"

"If you don't think of your soul, Joseph——" began Mrs. Truscott.

But the thatcher, who objected to the confessional—especially as practised by female confessors, rushed madly ahead.

“And I telled the master that I can never do no good wi’ that part o’ t’ kitchen garden till them gooseberry bushes is rived up,” he continued. “Ye see, mum, them there berry bushes, they were planted afore our old master died, and they’re getting that old and woody that they draw all t’ nature out o’ t’ soil round ’em. Now, as I do all t’ gardening now-a-days, I aim at improving that there garden, and them berry bushes bothers me more nor I can tell, and——”

“Because if you don’t think of your soul, Joseph——” interpolated Mrs. Truscott.

“And what I want, mum, is to rave them berry bushes reight out o’ th’ garden, and muck where they have been and plant a lot o’ raspberry canes,” said Joseph, who was making desperate efforts to monopolize the conversation, and to eat and drink at the same time. “T’ gardener at th’ Hall has some rare good canes to sell, mum, and if so be as you’d speak to the master—I’ve mentioned the matter to the young missis—I’d remble them old berry bushes out and get t’ ground mucked as soon as this thacking is done wi’. Ye see, mum——”

“And I hope all is right with your children’s souls, Joseph,” said Mrs. Truscott, who sat as immovable as an ivory statue, while the thatcher voiced his dislike to the worn-out gooseberry bushes.

"Yes, mum," replied Joseph, who had no objection to spiritual matters so long as they did not refer to himself. "They're a very good-living lot is ours, though I must say as how Keziah likes her religion warmish, like: them sermons about what's going to happen i' th' bad place, mum, suits her uncommon, now that she's certain she isn't going there herself. Michael, he favours church-going, mum, which I don't know as there's any harm i' that there, as I can see on, though being a chappiler misel'—it 'ud do the cockles of your heart good, mum, sometimes, to hear our Keziah and Michael fratch and fight about religion—one being a churcher and th' other a chap-piler. Aw, their souls is in a very good way, I should reckon, mum. And of course, as for Mia, why she's nowt but a bairn, and reckon nowt o' religion so far, an'——"

The elder of the two maids, a hard-bitten spinster of nearly middle age, who, like Lambert, was an old and tried retainer, put her head round the corner of the screen.

"I don't know if ye're aware on it, Joseph," she said; "but it's starting on to rain heavy, and I thowt ye'd be wanting to cover that there stack up at ye're agate on."

"Eh, by Gow, and so I mun!" exclaimed the thatcher, thankful that this freak of the weather would prevent old Mrs. Truscott from returning to personalities. "I mun so, my lass!"

He hastily drank off the remainder of his ale,

threw a big crust to the dog, and with a respectful obeisance to the old lady, set off in the direction of the stackyard. Patch followed behind, carrying the crust, uneaten, in his jaws. The wind had fallen, and the rain was now coming down in a straight and steady downpour, which looked like lasting for the night. The thatcher saw that there was no more work to be done that afternoon—all that remained was to pull the tarpaulin, which lay rolled up on the ridge of the stack, down over the unthatched part. He hastened up the ladder to carry this operation out, and at the top stepped off it on to the new thatch, shiny and slippery with the quickly falling rain. And before he could realize his danger the thatcher's foot slipped, and he fell backward over the edge of the stack.

The dog, who had laid down his crust to watch his master, saw the fall, and whimpered. When the man stirred feebly, and then lay still, he went over to the body and sniffed at it.

VI

LAMBERT had only just gone out of the great kitchen when his master, Henry Truscott, a bluff and hearty man of fifty, came into the house from the garden entrance, followed by Hosea Yardsworth, who carried a bundle of official-looking documents. As was usual with him, the farmer was in more or less of a bustle.

"Now then, Hosea, sit ye down at that table and get them papers sorted out and let me get 'em signed," he said. "Here, ye lasses, clear these things away—who's been eating and drinking here?"

"Lambert's had his drinking there, sir—the old missis wanted to speak to him," answered the elder maid.

"Aye, this rain 'll stop him thatching," said the farmer meditatively. "Well now then, let's see—we shall want pen and ink. How are you, mother, now you've got down?"

"This is one of my good days, Henry," replied the old lady, who was peering at Hosea Yardsworth, who had been bowing and nodding at her since he entered the kitchen. "What gentleman is that, my dear?"

"It's no gentleman, it's naught but Hosea Yardsworth wi' some papers for me to sign," answered

Mr. Truscott bluntly. "Sit you down, Hosea—will you take a glass?"

"Thanking you, sir," said Hosea, taking a seat at the table. "Servant, ma'am—I hope I see you well, ma'am."

"Oh, it's Hosea, is it?" said old Mrs. Truscott. "Yes, to be sure. And how's your poor mother, Hosea—she hasn't been to see me of late."

As Hosea's mother had been dead and safely bestowed in Scarthington churchyard for some twelve years, Hosea was somewhat perturbed, but Mr. Truscott, in passing him on his way to the cupboard where the decanters were kept, gave him a nudge.

"Tell her your mother's very well and been uncommon busy," he said. "Th' old lass is losing her memory."

"Why, thank you, ma'am, my mother's pretty middling, but she's been very much occupied of late with one thing and another," said Hosea, thus prompted. "She sent her best respect and kind love, ma'am."

"I hope all's well with her soul," murmured the old lady.

"Oh, I'm sure it is, ma'am! I make no doubt about it," answered Hosea hastily. "Yes, ma'am, on that point I——"

"Now then, Hosea, help yourself and let's get to these here papers," said Mr. Truscott, placing decanter and glass on the table. "'Od rabbit it, I'll be guardian no more!—it's nowt else but signing

papers and books, and I'm sure I don't know half o' what it's all about. Here, Mary Ellen—bring some water! Now, then, what *is* it all about?"

The younger maid brought in water; the farmer and Hosea filled their glasses; Hosea, reverting to his legal style, learnt when he was an attorney's 'prentice, began to explain. Before he had said many words the elderly maid came from behind the screen, evidently disturbed in mind.

"Master," she said, "I wish you'd come and look at this dog o' Lambert's. It's been three times to the scullery door and off again, and it's acting and whining that queer! I think something must be wrong."

The farmer, who knew the remarkable intimacy between Joseph and his dog, stared at the woman in silence for a moment, and then picking up his hat, rose from the table and went out of the room, motioning Hosea to follow him. They passed through the inner kitchen to the scullery; Patch was hovering about the door, restless and whimpering. Mr. Truscott looked at him and beckoned the elder maid.

"Susannah!" he said. "There's summat wrong! Don't say nowt, and keep Mary Ellen quiet. Hosea, come with me."

They went across the open space that led to the stackyard; Patch ran before them, still whining and trembling.

"He's more like a Christian nor a dog, Hosea, is that there animal!" said Mr. Truscott. "I'm afraid summat's happened Lambert."

"Sort of man that might have a fit, sir," suggested Hosea. "I've noticed he's beginning to get a bit red about his neck, like, is Joseph."

The farmer made no answer to this—he was thick-necked and disposed to apoplexy himself, and had no desire to hear anything that might have a vague relationship to his own possible fate. He hurriedly entered the stackyard, and turning round the corner of the first line of stacks, came into full view of the thatcher's body lying at the foot of the ladder. By this time the dog had reached it, and after licking his master's face, stood with an uplifted paw, mutely asking help from the living for the dead.

"Dear, dear, dear, this is a bad job!" exclaimed Mr. Truscott. "He's fallen from the stack, I'll warrant. We must have t' doctor at once, Hosea—I'll slip on to my mare."

"There's no doctor can do any good here, sir," said Hosea, who had hastily examined the body. "He's gone, right enough, is poor Joseph. Broken his neck, I should say."

Then they both stood upright and stared at each other; and the dog, examining their faces, began to whimper like a child that comes suddenly face to face with a hitherto unknown calamity.

"We shall have to get him inside, Hosea," said the farmer. "There's two or three of the lads in the stables somewhere—I'll fetch 'em. Do ye wait here with him. And then ye must go up to Spinney Hill and fetch Michael—he's shepherding there. Dear,

dear! I'd rather ha' lost a fortune nor that this had happened!"

Hosea waited by the dead man, performing such offices as he could for him, until the farmer returned with some of his men. They were mostly lads, and they stared at the old labourer wonderingly.

"Of with you, Hosea," said Mr. Truscott. "Tell him gentle, like."

Hosea went off across the sombre, dripping fields. The afternoon was closing in now, and the rain was raising grey mists and shrouds of vapour about the almost leafless hedgerows. Hosea, in spite of his devotion to the accustomed pot and the occasional glass, still possessed imagination and feeling—he sighed deeply as he realized the connection between the weeping skies and the sudden death of Old Dosey.

At the top of Spinney Hill he encountered Reuben Gaunt, who had unyoked his horses and was about to return home. A comfortable idea seized upon him.

"Reuben 'll tell him better than me," he thought. "I'll tell Reuben."

He went up to the ploughman, who, having fetched his old overcoat from the sheep-fold, had draped it over his head and shoulders, preparatory to mounting one of his horses. Reuben stared at him, wondering what he was doing there.

"Now, my lad," said Hosea. "Turning out a wet 'un, isn't it?"

Reuben replied in a curt monosyllable, still wondering what brought Hosea out in the rain. At that

hour he was generally to be found in the kitchen of the Plough and Harrow, holding forth to such as might be there—what he should be doing in that corner of the land passed Reuben's comprehension.

"Michael Lambert's shepherding somewhere about here, isn't he?" asked Hosea.

"Next field," answered Reuben, still wondering and suspicious.

Hosea coughed warningly.

"Well, now, my lad," he said; "of course, such things will happen, and we ought to be prepared for 'em—the fact is, Joseph's met with an accident. Fallen off a stack that he was thacking."

"Broken owt?" asked Reuben.

"Well, my lad, he has—he's broken his neck, poor fellow," replied Hosea.

Reuben's blue eyes widened; his mouth opened.

"Dead?" he exclaimed.

"As a door-nail," answered Hosea. "Now, you must go and break the news to Michael yonder—him and you's mates. And bring him back to me—I'll go with him to the house. Break it gentle, like."

Reuben stared hard at him for a minute, as if scarcely comprehending. Then, nodding his head, he turned away, leaving Hosea standing by the steaming horses. In the still steadily pouring rain he passed through a gap in the hedge, and went with bowed head towards Michael, a grey figure in the desolate landscape.

VII

THAT day, being Tuesday, was an eventful one in the week's domestic economy of the Lambert family; it threw a shadow before it for the three preceding days, and left a memory behind it for the remaining three. For some years before her mother had become a hopeless invalid, and naturally ever since that had come to pass, Keziah Lambert had been the mainspring of the family machinery, and had originated and settled a rule of life, which was as strict and unaltering as the laws of the Medes and Persians. Each day of the lawful six had its appointed tasks and duties, and Tuesday was washing day, just as Wednesday was ironing day, Thursday general turning-out and cleaning up day, and Friday baking-day; Monday and Saturday being devoted to light and odd-and-end pursuits. This meant that from an early hour in the morning until a late hour in the evening, Tuesday was passed in an atmosphere of soft soap, steam, and sharp shafts from Keziah's tongue. Tuesday evening was the only one in the week on which the elder Lambert took a night out; it was his custom to make a hurried supper that evening, canopied by the rows upon rows of drying garments, with which Keziah ornamented the ceiling

of the living room, and then to retreat to the Plough and Harrow, where he passed the time over a pot of ale and a pipe until such time arrived as he could retire to bed. As for Michael he, too, on washing days tarried little at the supper-table; his haunt of refuge, however, was not the public-house, but the cottage of Old Wellington. In summer he helped the market-gardener with his flowers and vegetables, in winter he sat in the house, watching Rebecca sew or knit, and hearing the old man tell tales of the days when as many as forty stage-coaches passed through the village in the course of a day.

Although it was in all respects superior to the rest of the cottages in Down-Town, the Lambert cottage was scarcely adapted to the purpose of carrying out a weekly wash without inconvenience and discomfort to the inmates. It stood a little way back from the street, being parted by a small garden, enclosed in a privet hedge, wherein Lambert cultivated such homely and satisfying plants as gilliflowers, stocks, hollyhocks, pansies, and a few choice flowers, which seemed to have originally housed themselves without invitation. There was a porch over the door, made of laths, and it was covered with a vigorous jessamine which, in the course of years, had spread itself all over the walls of the cottage, and being rarely trimmed had made the interior very dark. Once within the cottage the living room opened itself out—an apartment of some size having a stairway to the upper chambers, rising at its rear wall. On its

right-hand side was a smaller room, originally intended for use as a best parlour, but long since transformed into a bedroom for Michael. Upstairs there were two sleeping chambers—one for the husband and wife, the other for the two daughters. And behind the living room, reached by a door which opened under the stairway, was a barton or lean-to shed, which served all manner of purposes, being large, lofty, and designed for practical matters. On its walls were hung hoes, rakes, forks, spades, for use in the kitchen garden at the back and the patch of flower-garden in front; various things of the same nature were piled on the rafters which supported the open roof; on the shelves, which had been knocked together at one end of it, were jars containing such matters as pickled cabbage, pickled onions, and pickled walnuts; sacks of potatoes stood in one corner, and for some period of the year apples carefully gathered from the trees were ranged on straw in another. There were papers of dried herbs and nets of onions hanging from the rafters; here, too, depended the salted remains, growing less and less as the year advanced, of the pig which Lambert killed every Christmas. This might be said to be the larder and general purposes part of the lean-to shed; it lay on the left-hand side of a bricked path which intersected the whole structure, and led from the house door to the garden entrance. On the right-hand side the shed was given up to things entirely connected with washing. Under the window was a

sink, furnished with a great basin of tin, at which Michael and his father performed their ablutions and where the crockery was washed after the various meals. In one corner was a set-pot with a stove underneath it; in the other, one of the chief joys, and at the same time direct tribulations of Keziah's existence, a patent mangling machine, the like of which only existed in such households as the Truscotts' and the Milthorpes', the principal farmers of Scarthington, and possibly (though of that she was not sure) in the laundries of the Hall and the Vicarage. Keziah had bought that mangle at Cornchester Show; it had seemed to her a much more wonderful thing than all the American and Canadian labour-saving machines which flanked it put together. Up to the time of its acquisition she had carried her washing to be mangled at old Henny Simpson's stone-bed mangle, a venerable affair, made as far off as the time of William and Mary, worked by an elaborate system of rollers and a sort of lever-handle which, if once released, had a trick of spinning violently round and hitting the operator either on his head—which stunned him—or on his elbow, which merely made him sick.

Keziah's methods on a washing day were as methodical as her ideas of religion, which were based on an improved and heightened comminatory service. Believing that if you want anything you must do it yourself, disdaining to trouble the men-folk whose labours, she held, were not in the house but

abroad in the fields, and never expecting anything of her sister Mia, who, in addition to being young, had a distaste for hard work and an unconcealed liking for such luxury as she could get, Keziah on Tuesdays rose betimes, lighted the fire under the set-pot, which she had filled with water the night before, and plunged into battle with a fierce resolution. The mangle, the washing-tub, the peggy-tub and its stick, the rinsing-tub, were all dragged into proper position, as if they had been refractory children who must be pulled by the ear to school, and in summer, or in any drying weather, the clothes line was stretched from post to post in the garden; in other weathers a network of cordage was spread across the rafters of the living room. Then came the attack on the living room itself. Every article of furniture was marshalled against the walls, the treasured sewing-machine was covered with newspaper, and the family Bible, on the chest of drawers, was wrapped in a table-cloth; all the ornaments on the chimney-piece were hidden away in a cupboard, and the drug-geting and hearthrug were rolled up and thrust under Michael's bed. On that morning everybody in the place had to shift for himself or herself in the matter of breakfast; the two men generally swallowed a mugful of hot tea or coffee, cut themselves great shives of bread and bacon, and escaped to quieter regions; Mia summoned up sufficient energy to make her mother a cup of tea and toast some bread for her, and broke her own fast on the same

fare in Mrs. Lambert's chamber. Thus clear of the men and of Mia, Keziah gave the signal for onset—the rest of the morning was a whirlwind of furious scrubbing: the clatter of Keziah's clogs and the rasp of Keziah's voice mingled with the odour of soap-suds and the pouring forth from the set-pots of clouds of uproarious steam.

Keziah never relaxed muscle nor abated an endeavour until the last rag was washed and hung up or out to dry, the washing machinery had been scrubbed and put in its place, the set-pot emptied and dried, the fire raked out, and the floor of the shed swilled and besomed. Then, before beginning the task of setting the living room straight, she permitted herself the pleasure of sitting down to a cup of tea, accompanied by the only luxury in which she ever had at any time indulged. Living from day to day on the plainest and simplest food, as anyone might have judged from her meagre, flat-chested form and thin face, over which her yellow skin was drawn like old parchment stretched over a skull, Keziah on Tuesdays gave herself a treat. A few doors away lived a woman who had a rare trick of making muffins—at five o'clock every Tuesday she presented herself at the Lamberts' door with a plateful of these delicacies, soaked in butter, and piping hot from the oven. At five o'clock, too, Keziah had the tea-table laid exactly in front of the fire, with something in the way of a delicacy—a spring onion and a fresh lettuce or so in summer; a bit of pig's

fry or a toasted cheese in winter—to give an extra relish to the muffins, and upon these occasions and on no other, she brought out a certain black bottle from a rigidly locked recess in the cupboard. The contents of this, never referred to as anything but “brown cream” or “a little something,” bore a very close resemblance to Jamaica rum, and it was an understood thing between Keziah and the neighbour that they were only taken in the Tuesday tea as medicine highly necessary after a day spent in washing clothes and making muffins.

On the afternoon which saw Lambert’s fall from the stack Keziah had passed through the waste places of the day’s desert, and having entered the Promised Land, which she always kept in view while journeying through them, was feasting on its milk and honey in the shape of hot and well-brewed tea, equally hot muffins, and a dish of tinned salmon, which she had caused her neighbour to procure from the general shop. Both women were feeling that comforting glow of mind and body which comes from the consciousness of a day’s work well done. The stricken mother upstairs had been served with her tea some time previously, and had dropped off into one of her frequent dozes; Mia, following her own natural inclinations, had gone Up-Town, ostensibly to take a message, but in reality to gossip with some of her friends; Keziah and the neighbours, therefore, had the living room to themselves. There was a bright fire; the kettle sang on the hob, and the family

cat purred contentedly on the hearthrug, expectant of the remains of the tinned salmon.

"And I'm sure I thank the Lord, Sarah Mary Lightowler, that He's been pleased to see me through another washing day!" said Keziah piously, yet in a tone which implied that she would have been in no wise surprised if the Almighty's intentions might have been different. "What wi' scrubbing and peggying, and then putting t' things through that there wringing machine, and all by one's self, I'm sure it's enough to make a Tartar drop!"

"Aye, I'm sure!" said Mrs. Lightowler feelingly. "And of course, when there's two men and three women i' a house, it makes a deal o' weshing. And such a pity an' all 'at your Mia's no more use than what she is, too!"

"Mia! Nay!" said Mia's sister. "Nay, Mia's no use at owt o' that sort. If t' washing were left to Mia we might as well sleep i' mucky sheets and wear foul linen till t' Doomsday comes, whenever that may be. Mia's no more use at a washing-day nor what that there cat is."

"And her going i' eighteen an' all!" exclaimed Mrs. Lightowler, as she conveyed another hot muffin from the oven to the plate which stood on the slop-basin. "I'm sure I don't know what young gels thinks on now-a-days."

"Thinks on? Why they thinks o' nowt but men, and sweethearting and such like fondness!" answered Keziah, pouring out more tea and pushing the china

cow which contained the brown cream across the table after her friend's cup. "Help yourself, Sarah Mary—I'm sure a body's none the worse for a sup o' summat warming after tewin' and moilin' wi' a week's washing. Thinks on indeed! Nowt but men, as I say—a pack of popinjays—and sweethearting. And if it isn't that it's fine feathers. I'm sure my father's clean spoiling our Mia—it were only last week, when he'd drawn his harvest wage, 'at he gave her a whole sovereign to buy her a new dress piece with—some sort o' blue they call it—t' bairn's as vain as a peacock already without him encouraging her in it."

"Well, of course, she's a very good-looking girl, is Mia," said Mrs. Lightowler, "and no doubt Lambert's proud on her. But we all know what good looks is, Keziah—they're all on t' top, and there's nowt at t' bottom on 'em. They weern't keep a house clean, nor yit cook a man his dinner. And they do say 'at Mia and young Reuben Gaunt's hangin' arms now, so I expect they'll be for weddin'?"

"Nay, I know nowt about it," answered Keziah. "I've enough to do in looking after the house and my poor mother and a couple o' men—I'm sure it takes me all my time to fill their bellies for 'em!—wi'out taking heed o' Mia and her goings on. Happen she'll liven up if she has to cook Reuben Gaunt his meals—he's gotten an appetite like a feeding bullock, from what I seen on him!"

"All men's t' same," said Mrs. Lightowler. "I'm

sure our James owt to be as fat as a lord, considering t' stuff 'at he shifts. But it's like t' men—us poor women has to make a bite and a sup do."

As Mrs. Lightowler had at that time consumed a whole plate of tinned salmon, three muffins, and two large cups of well-flavoured tea, her bite and sup was presumably a figure of speech; that her thirst was not yet assuaged became evident from the fact that she passed the cup over the table for the third time, and subsequently drew more sustenance from the china cow.

"I hear they're i' want of an under-housemaid at the Hall," said Keziah, "and I wish our Mia could get the job. Her father's never been for letting her go to place—he reckons she's nowt but a bairn—but he might be persuaded to let her go there. And it 'ud be a rare good thing for her an' all, Sarah Mary."

"Aye, I'm sure!" agreed the neighbour. "Young gels doesn't fall to be at a loose end, Keziah—they want summat to okkipy 'em."

"I'm sure I've always had enough to okkipy me," said Keziah. "I never were one for running after t' men, not I! I'd as soon think o' runnin' after a dressed-up flay-crow as——"

At this moment a footstep sounded on the flagged porch outside the door; the latch was raised, and the subject of the recent discourse entered the living room. She came in somewhat hurriedly, leaving the door open, and having crossed the threshold, stopped

in a listening attitude, looking back into the grey twilight from which she had just emerged. She looked round at the women.

"Listen!" she said. "There's the passing bell tolling. Somebody's dead!"

A dead silence fell on the kitchen—save for the singing of the kettle and the purring of the cat. From the grey void outside came the sound of the bell far away at the other end of the village, sending out its heavy, monotonous strokes.

The three women listened with parted lips. Skilled in village matters, they were waiting for the additional strokes at the end, which would tell the community whether its lost member was man, woman, or child.

The bell stopped—they strained their ears for its resumption. Suddenly it began again.

One—two—three—four—five — six — seven — eight—nine.

A man.

There were hurried steps in the road—the garden gate clicked and was slammed—the steps sounded on the flagged path of the garden. Then Michael came into the light of the lamp, and at sight of him Keziah rose from her seat with a stifled cry.

VIII

AROUND the Lamberts' cottage next morning hung a mysterious atmosphere, which marked it out with vivid distinction from its neighbours. The white cotton blinds were drawn in the windows upstairs and down; the house door, which usually stood open, was closely shut; the very plants and flowers in the garden seemed to deprecate such colour and gaiety as they promised. Folk passing along the road—men going to their work, and children slowly progressing towards school—looked at the cottage with half-averted and wondering eyes, for to country people nothing is more mysterious than death. Of late no one had died in Down-Town—Tin Tom's missis, it was true, had lost a baby a year or two back, but babies were of small account. Old Dosey had been a well-known figure, a species of figure-head, and certainly the most important of Down-Towners next to Thomas Green; it seemed a marvellous thing that he should be suddenly taken when he looked like living another twenty years.

"But that's a way that Them Above has," said Henny Simpson to the muffin-maker, who had carried her the bad news. "Far be it from me to say owt agen 'em, Sarah Mary Lightowler, but we all

hev' our own opinions, and it's mine that Them Above doesn't allus reckon rightly what they're a-doin' on. Theer were a good many people i' Down-Town that I could ha' spared better nor poor Joseph."

"Aye, I'm sure!" said Mrs. Lightowler. "But it's allus the way is that, Henny. Doesn't it say i' t' Good Book summat about 'The one shall be taken and the other left?' Eh, dear, dear!"

"I know nowt about what eyther t' one nor t' other were like i' that case," said Henny; "so I can't say which on 'em it were 'at owt to ha' been ta'en. All 'at I say is 'at there's folk i' Down-Town 'at I could see t' latter end on wi' a good deal more pleasure nor I shall see poor Joseph's latter end. And how are they all tekkin' it, Sarah Mary?"

"Nay, they're all very quiet about it," answered the muffin-maker. "They're not the sort to carry on a deal. They've telled t' mother—she didn't say nowt much exceptin' 'at she desired 'at Joseph should hev' real brass mountin's to his coffin and be buried wi' fowls and ham, same as what her own father were. No, everything's very peaceable, considering how sudden the blow fell."

"T' crowner 'll hev' to sit on t' body," said Henny. "Ye mun allus hev' a crowner and a jury to sit on bodies 'at happens owt like that theer. Wheer is t' body?"

"It's laid out i' Michael's chamber, next to t' living room," replied Mrs. Lightowler. "They laid

it out there so as there'd be no bother about getting it downstairs. He's made a beautiful corpse, has poor Joseph—I'm sure his face is as peaceful as you could wish to see—ye'd never think 'at he'd brokken his neck."

Peaceful as the atmosphere of this small house of death was, its usual rountine of events moved definitely forward. It was all very well, said Keziah, for rich folks to sit down and lament in idleness; poor folks, whatever grief or woe they might have, must perform the daily work. And so while Joseph lay silent for ever, on Michael's bed, with homely flowers about his folded hands, Keziah in the living room set about the Wednesday ironing in her accustomed methodical fashion. One by one the various articles of the Tuesday wash were taken down from the network of cordage under the rafters and piled in the big clothes-basket which Keziah subsequently lugged into the shed. For an hour Mia fed the patent mangle, and Keziah's thin and sinewy arms turned the handle; meanwhile the irons had been heating at the glowing fire. Presently a smell of hot metal on still damp clothes filled the cottage and penetrated to the road outside; behind the drawn blinds Keziah was ironing with the fierce determination with which she did everything. While she ironed, the younger sister, tearfully regretful of the indulgence which her father had shown her, did the necessary work upstairs and down—Keziah had no tears, and her eyes were keener and harder than ever.

In the course of the morning visitors came. The village constable called to leave a a whispered word or two about the inquest; Mary Ellen came down from Holly Tree Farm with a basket of creature comforts for the paralyzed mother upstairs, the carpenter looked in to measure the dead man for his coffin. And while the morning, which had broken joyfully, was at its brightest, the latch of the door was almost noiselessly lifted and a black figure stole into the darkened cottage as lightly as if it had been a shadow. This was the woman who in Up-Town and Down-Town alike was known as the Layer-Out. To most of the people in both sections of the village she was something of a mystery, being in effect as much a stranger as Tin Tom, albeit she, like him, had been several years in the place. She had descended upon the village almost as mysteriously as the tinman and his family, but instead of appropriating an empty house in what was practically No Man's Land, she had rented a decent cottage near the church, had paid a year's rent in advance, and had furnished her rooms in what was considered a superior fashion. After that she set up a card in her window which announced to all passers-by that Mrs. Gouldsbury made dresses and took in plain and fancy needlework. She obtained some sort of custom in these things, and never seemed to want for money, though it was well known that she spent little, her mode of life being extremely Spartan in its rigorous simplicity. Mere chance, however, directed

her energies into other channels—an epidemic of diphtheria revealed the fact that the silent, reserved woman was an accomplished nurse, and thereafter there was no case of sickness in Scarthington which she did not attend, no infant born at whose birth she did not assist, and no inhabitant die whose remains she did not compose for burial. As there were more births than deaths, especially in Down-Town, where frugality of living seemed to lead to superabundant fecundity, Mrs. Gouldsbury might have been called the “Bringer-In,” but as death affects the rustic imagination much more powerfully than birth, she was known all the place over by no other name than the Layer-Out.

Keziah, looking up from her ironing-board at this minister of death and the grave, felt a curious sensation. The Layer-Out was a tall, spare woman of excellent figure and erect carriage, who always wore clinging garments of dead black and a black coif-like headgear, all unrelieved by any speck of colour. Her face was the colour of old ivory; her eyes, dark as her gown, had a curious sombre gleam in them which made children shrink as she passed. Her features were clean-cut, regular, and handsome; what could be seen of her hair showed that it was of raven black streaked with widening patches of grey; her lips, well-formed, but thin and severe, rarely relaxed out of a straight, resolute line. No one had ever seen her smile; to have imagined her as capable of laughter would have been an

impossibility. When she laid out a corpse all the other women in the room kept a strict silence.

"How is your mother this morning, Keziah?" enquired Mrs. Gouldsbury as she stepped into the living room, asking the question in a cold, level tone, which was in curiously close keeping with her appearance. "Has she slept better?"

"Why, thank you, Mrs. Gouldsbury," answered Keziah; "she slept better nor what usual with her. You'd better go up and see her—Mia's tidying up there, but my mother'll be pleased to have a word with you."

The Layer-Out passed up the staircase like a black shadow, swiftly and noiselessly—Keziah watched her like one fascinated.

"I don't know what she makes me think of, that there woman!" she soliloquized, as the Layer-Out passed into Mrs. Lambert's chamber. "Happen it's one o' them Bible characters—the Witch of Endor, as Solomon had dealings with. I'm sure she might be a witch for the way she goes about—ye can't hear her feet fall!"

Just as quietly as it had disappeared, the black figure appeared again in the living room. Keziah, ironing for dear life at one of the dead man's shirts, and reflecting that as his stock of shirts and undergarments was all new they would come in for Michael that winter, almost started to hear the calm, incisive voice close to her.

"Your mother says I am to talk to you about the

mourning for Mia and you, Keziah," she said. "There is very little time in which to prepare it, but I can get Bertha Scholes to help me—she is at home just now, doing nothing. Now, what will you require?"

Keziah's face grew hard, and she favoured the shirt with a vicious bang of the iron.

"Well, I'm sure if my mother's got some brass put away i' some old stocking foot or other it's unbeknown to me, Mrs. Gouldsbury," she said with some asperity. "I don't see no occasion to spend a lot o' money i' that way—we can do wi' what little we have. I want nowt for myself—as you know. I never wear naught but black for best, and it's none two years yet since you made me that there merino gown, and of course my black cape's as good as new—I've only been wearing it o' Sundays since I bowt it three years come Martlemas. And I have a quantity o' crape 'at old Mrs. Truscott gave me when their old mastér died. I've had it put away in a box ever since—and I aim at doing up my best and the dolman wi' that there—me an' Sarah Mary Lightowler 'll do it happen to-night, but i' good time for the buryin', anyhow. So I shan't want nowt now, thanking you all the same, Mrs. Gouldsbury, and if so be as there's crape wanted for owt that Mia wants—and I expect she'll require summat, having nowt but coloured gowns—why, I've enough put away for her and myself, so there's no need to go wasting good brass on buying new."

"Of course Mia will want a new black frock," said Mrs. Gouldsbury with decision; "and you'd far better have had one yourself, Keziah—a black gown is always useful. However, you know best about that. You'd better let me see the crape while I'm here, and if it's good I'll take enough for Mia—she's coming up this afternoon. I've got some very good material in hand, as it happens; there'd have been enough to make dresses for both of you."

Keziah made no reply to the last remark; she went up the stairs and into her own chamber, and presently came down again with a mass of black crape, which she spread out on the centre table. The visitor appraised it with a knowing eye, measuring it off and estimating its worth.

"Yes," she said, "this is the very best, Keziah, and there's enough for you and Mia, and a lot left over. This has been expensive."

"Everything were of the best at old Mestur Truscott's buryin'," said Keziah, somewhat mollified by Mrs. Gouldsbury's praise of the crape. "There were no expense whatever spared. And the old missis were none mean wi' what were not required—she gev' me that there crape and a lot o' gloves an' handkerchers—I've never had to buy no Sunday gloves ever sin' t' old chap were taken, and if our Michael wants black gloves for his father's funeral, I can fix him up wi' half-a-dozen pair 'at's never been worn. 'Tak' these and put 'em away, Keziah,' says t' old missis; 'they're sure to come in some time or

other. And I hev' a dozen black-bordered handkerchers 'at she gev' me at th' same time," she added.

"I'll cut enough off this crape for Mia," said Mrs. Gouldsbury, pulling a pair of scissors out of her pocket; "and if you'll take my advice, Keziah, you'll let me trim your bonnet for you. I'll put some crape on it, and I've got some trimmings that'll suit it."

"Well, I've no objection to your doing t' bonnet, Mrs. Gouldsbury," said Keziah. "I never were much of a hand at bonnet-trimming, and I daresay my Sunday 'll do with a bit o' smartening—one doesn't go to a burying every day, and when you do you may as well be in t' fashion—I'll fetch it down and you can tek' it away wi' you," she added, turning to the stairs. "Of course I expect you'll be making our Mia a new hat?"

"I've told Mrs. Gouldsbury how I want my hat trimming," said Mia, who at that moment came out of her mother's chamber and descended the stairs; "she's got a black shape that'll just suit me."

"Well, I hope you'll remember on what occasion you've to wear it," said Keziah with asperity. "Buryin's is none the events to show fine clothes off, my lass, and nobody'll think so much about a fine hat."

Mia made no other answer to this than a toss of her head; she passed Keziah on the stairs and went down to the table where Mrs. Gouldsbury was measuring off and cutting the crape.

"Will it be all right on my gown?" she said anxiously. "It's a long time since Keziah had it given. I don't like old-fashioned stuff."

"You couldn't get crape of this quality for love or money now-a-days, child," said Mrs. Gouldsbury. "It's splendid quality—good enough for a duchess. I shall take enough to trim your hat, too, and——"

Just then came a sound of feet outside the door and then a knock: Keziah, appearing at the head of the stairs with an ancient bonnet-box in her hands, looked surprised.

"See who that is, Mia," she said. "It's none o' th' neighbours, for they'd ha' walked in wi'out knockin'. It's may be the Squire's lady—she's sure to call—howsomever, th' house is clean enough."

Mia opened the door; two men, removing their hats, stepped in on their tiptoes as if afraid of disturbing the dead. Mrs. Gouldsbury, busied at the table, turned and looked at them; both she and the sisters, recognizing one, gave their attention to the other, a stranger.

The man whom they knew, Mr. James Belford, was the one farmer of the village who practised his religion at the little chapel in Down-Town; he was, in fact, the mainstay and chief agent of the Methodist community, being chapel-steward, class-leader, and a local preacher. The scoffers said he was a Methodist because he was only a little farmer; while the great men like Henry Truscott could afford to ride stout cobs, drive smart dog-carts to market, and

do no more work than was accomplished in giving orders and superintending their men, Belford had to follow the plough himself, dress of a week days in corduroy, and live little better than a labourer. That he had now come to the Lamberts' cottage on a ceremonial visit was evidenced in the fact that he wore his second-best suit, rigidly reserved for going to market in. There was something vaguely pathetic in Belford's appearance; he was a tall, loosely jointed, scraggy man who gave at the knees and walked with a pronounced stoop; his hair was always too long and his beard ragged; when he was not using them his hands and arms hung loose before him; his long thin face was careworn and often haggard; his hollow eyes were as sad as a dog's whom no one owns. They said of him amongst his own community that he preached like one of the old prophets who saw nothing but woe and desolation; outside the community there was no interest in him except amongst the better-off farmers, who regarded him with pitying contempt, wondering how long it would be before he went broke in his painful struggle to wring a living for his sickly wife and half-a-dozen children out of the seventy or eighty acres which he cultivated.

"Morning, Keziah, morning, Mia, morning, ma'am," said Belford, in his usual sad, colourless tones, which were almost as ghostlike and hollow as he himself looked. "Now, this gentleman here, Keziah, is Mestur Linacre—you'll happen not have

met him, for he doesn't come this way, but you'll know his name as one of the circuit stewards. Mes-tur Linacre farms at Yewford yonder, over th' other side of the circuit, and that's why we don't see ought of him in our parts—ours has the reputation, Mes-tur Linacre, I believe, of being one of the biggest circuits in the connection—aye, well, Keziah, Mestur Linacre had to call on me on business this morning, and I told him of your sad loss, and so he concluded to come across with me and offer his sympathy, like."

"It being our duty to comfort one another in affliction," said the stranger, in a deep, rich voice which sounded very impressive in the raftered living room. "Our duty and, I think, our inestimable privilege, Brother Belford."

"Aye, sir, it's one of the few privileges that we enjoy," answered the poor farmer in his saddest tones. "And one never knows when one mayn't want comforting one's self—it's a sad world at the best, is this."

"Let us trust—nay, feel assured—that our departed brother has attained unto a fairer one where all is joyfulness!" said the stranger with great fervour. "My friends, let me read you a passage descriptive of that blessed world."

He laid hands upon the family Bible, which reposed in state on a crocheted antimacassar that covered the mahogany chest of drawers, and unfastening the heavy brass clasp which confined its

morocco boards, cleared his throat and began to turn the gilt-edged pages over. Belford fell into a thoughtful aspect; Mia leaned against the stairs, thinking of the new hat; Keziah, mindful of the fact that she was a professed Christian and a duly accredited member of the Methodist society, preserved a suitable outward demeanour and inwardly chafed at the interruption of her ironing; of all there only Mrs. Gouldsbury, ostensibly busied with the crape and the bonnet, kept a sharp observation upon the man who obviously rejoiced in offering spiritual consolation to the bereaved.

That the individual thus introduced into the house of mourning was a person of interest the woman who watched him without appearing to do so would not have denied. Although Belford had described him as a farmer there was nothing of the agriculturist in his appearance. If he was a farmer, thought Mrs. Gouldsbury, he was not, like Belford, a poor one. Mr. Linacre's garments were fashioned of the best and glossiest broadcloth; his linen was irreproachable; his boots shone; the hat which he had laid aside on entering was high in the crown, exceeding broad in the brim, and made of the shiniest silk. The cut of his clothes, too, was most unfarmer-like; it was also very unlike the prevalent fashion in men's garments. The coat, a sort of compromise between a frock-coat of the accepted pattern and an old-fashioned overcoat, was made with a high rolling collar, gathered in tightly at the waist, and was

very full in the skirts; within its generous swell at the breast a fancy waistcoat of black silk, shot with white spots, was revealed. Mr. Linacre wore a very high collar, the points of which stood up on each side of his chin; around this was folded and swathed an immense black silk stock, fastened at his neck with a large old-fashioned pin. Such an attire was rare, if not unique; Mrs. Gouldsbury, who had seen something of the world, considered it critically. She decided that it properly belonged to late Georgian or very early Victorian days. In this she was quite correct; Mr. Linacre, being a shining light in the Methodist denomination, had copied his attire from the costumes of the divines of fifty years anterior to his own age, deriving his idea of them from certain steel engravings in a collection of old connectional magazines which had long been in the possession of his family.

But Mr. Linacre's own appearance, physiognomy, and presence interested Mrs. Gouldsbury more than Mr. Linacre's attire. He was a tall man, nearly as tall as Belford, who would have been a very tall man indeed if it had not been for his confirmed stoop, but unlike him he held himself with a dignity which was not pompous yet was certainly conscious. Neither stout nor slim, he was a fine figure of a man, and the observant woman who watched him as he rolled out verses of Holy Scripture in a fine organ note, thought that he would have looked well in a bishop's apron and gaiters. But his face was more interesting

than his figure. It was a large, clean-shaven face, and there was nothing of the farmer or the open-air man about it. Without being pasty it was pale—not an unhealthy paleness, but of a curious wax-like pallor, which was accentuated by the black stock. In the midst of it protruded a large, curiously shaped nose, long as a badger's, sharp as a fox's—a nose that looked as if it were meant to be used as a plough or a gimlet. Beneath that were lips which were fleshy and sensuous, though they met together in a prim and precise purse above a somewhat heavy chin and jowl. Nose and mouth alike were remarkable features in this face, but more remarkable still were the eyes, which, set closely together under eyebrows which slanted towards each other from the temples, were unusually small and bright, like those of an animal seen looking at one from within a burrow. Over those slanting eyebrows and small eyes the hair, jet black in colour, was worn in a peculiar fashion, being brushed straight down without any parting from the crown over the forehead, where just above the level of the eyebrows it was cut in a straight line, exactly like the fringes of ponies. This fashion of wearing his hair Mr. Linacre (who, Mrs. Gouldsbury decided, was about thirty-eight or forty years of age) had, like the cut of his coat, derived from the steel portraits of the old divines already alluded to; in fact, he somewhat prided himself on the fact that in his general appearance he was of the stately and dignified order.

"Blessed, blessed words, my brethren!" said Mr. Linacre, closing the Bible and returning it gently to its place on the crocheted antimacassar. "Wells of comfort, my friends, in the valley of Baca. My friends, we will engage in prayer."

Before the assemblage could drop upon its knees, Mrs. Gouldsbury, with a whispered word to Mia, caught up the lengths of crape which she desired, together with Keziah's bonnet, and hurriedly left the cottage. When the door had closed upon her Mr. Linacre lifted up his voice.

"And now, my friends," he said, at length rising to his feet and dusting the fine broadcloth of his trousers with a scented handkerchief, "there is, I understand from Brother Belford, a poor invalid, your worthy maternal parent, upstairs, who would doubtless like a visit from an elder of the church in her affliction. You will perhaps prepare her for a visit, sister Lambert?"

"Well, I'll just see how my mother is, sir," replied Keziah. "She might be asleep, and again she mightn't; and when she's awake she's none so easy to manage—she's a bit of a queer 'un sometimes. Take a chair, Mestur Linacre, and I'll step upstairs and see how she is."

"Aye, an' while you're engaged in that way, I'll just step across to give my son some directions that I should have given him before," said Belford. "You'll happen come over when you're ready, Mestur Linacre?"

"I will rejoin you in due course, my friend," replied Linacre, taking a chair and composing himself into a becoming posture. He waited until Belford had left the cottage and Keziah had disappeared upstairs; then he turned and took a long and deliberate look at Mia.

"So you are the flower of the flock, my dear?" he said in a rich and caressing tone. "Your poor father's ewe-lamb, no doubt?"

Mia, who was examining the crape at the centre table, gave him a swift glance and murmured, "Yes, sir." Linacre noted the flash of the girl's eyes, which were of that subtle red-brown which one sees sometimes in pansies; he noted the colour of her hair, a warm red-brown, too, with a glint of gold in it, and he was not unmindful of her fine skin and her supple figure and its rounded lines. He wondered at the difference between the parchment-skinned, lantern-jawed, flat-chested Keziah and this young beauty, as fresh and attractive as a dewy meadow on a May morning.

"And are you engaged in any occupation, my dear?" he asked in fatherly fashion.

Mia shook her head.

"No, sir. But Keziah wants me to go as house-maid to the Hall," she answered.

"Ah! And you would like that, my dear?" he asked.

Mia shook her head again.

"I'd rather go into a town, sir," she answered.

"A town, eh?" said Linacre. "Dear me, now—well, I believe I know a lady who might be in want of a smart parlourmaid. She lives in Clothford, and that's a big town."

"Clothford! Oh, that's where the pantomime is!" cried Mia. "I should like——" but then she stopped, remembering the visitor's semi-clerical status.

Linacre, who had risen to his feet and was regarding her with an expression of paternal admiration, laughed softly and patted her shoulder.

"Never mind, my dear," he said. "Young people like a little pleasure. Here—there's a little present for you—you'll be wanting something now that poor father's gone, no doubt. Don't tell anybody," he added warningly. "We're commanded not to let our left hands know what our right hands do, you know."

He slipped a sovereign into Mia's hand, and as he heard the door of the mother's chamber open turned to examine a funeral card which hung in an ancient frame over the mantelpiece.

"Will you please to walk up, sir?" said Keziah's voice.

Left to herself Mia looked at the gold piece which lay in her rosy palm, and a gleam of pleasure shot into the red-brown eyes. Then it faded away—she had remembered that for some time she could wear nothing but black things—for a year there would be no more gay ribbons.

"I'll buy myself a pair of smart shoes like the lady's maid at the Hall wears," she said, and made haste to hide Linacre's gold.

When Linacre came down she held the door open for him with a shy smile that implied the secret between them. He bade her and Keziah farewell in a fatherly fashion, and went across the road to Belford's farm. A few minutes later he emerged from the yard at the side of the house, seated in a smart dog-cart; Belford, looking mean and shabby by contrast, walked at the side of the trap, keeping a hand on the splashboard. They passed up the road.

"Well, you'll do what you can, brother?" said Linacre as the horse paced slowly forward. "Of course I'll do what's possible to help you, but Mr. Mortimer is a hard man, Belford, very hard. He is not one of us, brother, you know."

"I'm well aware of that, sir," replied Belford, with something like a groan. "Yes, I'm well aware of it, brother Linacre. But I'm sure I don't know what to do, sir. Times have been that bad that I've had to scrape and scrape to get the rent together. And it's only two lots of interest on the bill of sale that's due, sir."

"Aye, but that gives Mortimer the right to sell you up, stock, furniture, and all!" said Linacre. "That's the worst of it, brother."

"Yes, sir, I know it is," said the poor farmer. "And, of course, if he does sell me up—why, we shall be homeless."

"We must trust in the Lord, brother," said Linacre.

"I do trust in the Lord, sir," answered Belford. "But I must find some earthly help as well. I was wondering if—if——"

"If what?" asked Linacre sharply.

"If some well-to-do member of society would help me, sir," said Belford. "I thought perhaps you might say a word for me, sir, to some rich gentleman—there's plenty in the circuit, I'm sure, and I've a good record, Mestur Linacre."

"Well, I'll see, brother, I'll see," answered Linacre. He pulled out his watch and consulted it. "Dear me!" he said. "It's already noon. Well, good morning, brother, and the Lord be with you."

He whipped up his horse then and drove away, leaving the poor bewildered Belford wondering where he was going to find money to pay off a fatal bill of sale.

IX

ON THE following Saturday afternoon, that being the fourth day after his death, Joseph was buried amongst various ancestors on the north side of the village church, and a choice selection of relatives and friends returned to the cottage to grace the obsequies with a funeral tea, Mrs. Lightowler and Tin Tom's wife having remained behind to set the feast in readiness against their coming back. As Keziah had taken the precaution to lock up the black bottle, and to carry the key of the beer-barrel away with her, these ladies performed their duties with accuracy and despatch, and set out a repast which, in the opinion of the muffin-maker, would have made the mouth of an Indian Nabob water. The stricken widow upstairs had been particular that Joseph should be buried with fowls and ham as her own father had been; Joseph's last honours in the event had been grander than she anticipated. Following the usual custom of village life on these occasions those who could give had given of their substance. The butcher had sent a fine piece of sirloin; Mr. Henry Truscott had sent a noble ham, and his wife had added a couple of barn-door fowls; the Squire

had sent a hare and a brace of birds; butter, eggs, and cream had poured in from more than one source; even poor Mrs. Belford, having nothing better to give, had made a batch of freshly baked teacakes. Tin Tom's missis, who was always hungry, beholding all this wealth of provision, had vague wonders as to whether a weekly death in a needy family might not be a considerable advantage.

Michael was glad when all the eating and drinking was over. He was no lover of feasting, although possessed of a very healthy appetite, and he preferred a piece of boiled bacon and an onion to all the delicacies in the world, while as for drinking he never went beyond his regulation pint of ale. When he was sure that everybody had eaten to their hearts' content, and while the women were beginning with much clatter of earthenware and clicking of tongues to clear the tables, he signed to Reuben Gaunt, and they went out through the lean-to shed into the garden, and sitting on the fence lighted their pipes.

"I'm glad that's over and done with, Reuben," said Michael presently. "I'm no believer in that sort o' thing. What folks wants to eat and drink for just because somebody's dead, I'm sure I don't know!"

"It's the custom," said Reuben. "Seems a queer 'un, an' all, Michael, lad. It seems as if they were waiting to ate up all 'at t' dead man had left."

"Well, they've none eat up owt 'at my poor father left," said Michael, "for he'd nowt much to leave."

"I expect he were i' t' buryin' club and insured, weren't he, Michael?" asked Reuben.

"Oh, aye, he were i' t' buryin' club right enough and insured an' all," replied Michael. "Aye, all t' expenses comes out o' t' club money, and there'll be a matter from t' insurance folk—he paid twopence a week, or summat like that—it'll pay for t' mournin', anyway."

"Why, that's summat," said Reuben. "It makes no debts. But it'll make a difference to ye, Michael, my lad, your father's dyin' so sudden, like."

Michael puffed hard at his pipe and sighed deeply.

"Aye," he said, "it will so, Reuben!—it will. Not 'at I mind, for I'd do owt for my own flesh and blood, but now—now that t' poor owd lad's gone so sudden I shall have to keep t' rest on 'em. And—as ye know, Reuben, lad, I'd aimed at weddin' 'Becca this back-end. It can't be—now."

Reuben made no reply, and Michael after more puffing at his pipe, laughed, a little bitterly.

"I think, Reuben, owd lad," he said, clapping his hand on his friend's shoulder. "I think we're all like Old Wellington's ass—we're in a pinfold!"

PART THE SECOND
THE FOWLER'S NET

I

ABOUT a week after the day on which Mr. Linacre paid his visit of condolence to the Lambert family, and promised James Belford to see what he could do for him in his time of trouble, anyone who happened to know the circuit steward, and also happened to be in Clothford, and at the Midland Railway Station there one evening at half-past seven, might have seen him alight from a local train and walk briskly into the town. And had any such person been curious about Mr. Linacre's next movements, or indulged his or her curiosity so far as to wonder what he was doing there and where he was going, and had followed him out of the station to see where he went, he or she would have seen Mr. Linacre enter a cab and drive away into the lighted streets. But it is only neighbours who are so curious, and Mr. Linacre's neighbours at half-past seven of an October evening were invariably to be found in the comfortable parlour of their farmsteads enjoying themselves with a pipe and a glass, after a long day spent on the land.

Mr. Linacre's cab proceeded through the heart of Clothford for some distance before its driver turned his horse's head into what was clearly a residential district. The streets were quiet there, and the lights

fewer, and when Mr. Linacre alighted at the point to which he had desired the driver to take him, he found himself on the edge of a wide-spreading heath or common, mapped out into sections by long rows of gas-lamps, between which ran wide paths of asphalt. This was one of the parks or recreation grounds of the town which its governing bodies might lay out but not enclose; Mr. Linacre, however, had not come there to inspect it by night, and when the cab had lumbered off into the dark again, he walked along the boundary road of the common as if he were well accustomed to the neighbourhood. There were houses of the suburban type of eminently desirable residence on his left hand, and they were well-lighted and looked warm and well-to-do, and through the windows of most of them he saw cheerful family parties at dinner, and he looked at them and at the houses kindly and indulgently, mentally appraising their value, and reflecting that it is much more fitting to be rich and to live in a nice hundred-pound-a-year villa than to dwell in a cottage and be poor.

As Mr. Linacre carried a small black Gladstone bag in the hand which was not occupied with his umbrella, it might have been supposed that he was going to spend the night with some friend at one of these suburban retreats—that, certainly, would have been the conclusion of anyone who knew that there were no trains from Clothford to his part of the country after seven o'clock. It might also have been

supposed, from his interested inspection of the houses, that he was searching for his exact destination—for a number or a name. Mr. Linacre's interest, however, was of a different nature—much of the property which he was passing belonged to him, and he was thinking that it was pleasant that he possessed it, and that he had tenants who always paid their rents regularly. But then, as he said to himself, it would indeed have been a strange thing if he had permitted himself to have any other sort of tenants.

Mr. Linacre was certainly going to spend the night in Clothford, if not in one of his own villas, and he presently turned into a side street which ran off the boundary road, and walked forward rather more rapidly. The houses in the street were not so pretentious as those facing the common; they had not so much gable or garden, being plain structures of three stories and of sober appearance, but they were eminently good and highly respectable, and an architect or a builder would have told you that they were in the best state of repair, none of them being in want of either paint or pointing. These houses, too, were Mr. Linacre's property; and at one of them he stopped, and, having first given a preliminary knock at the door, he took out a latch-key and let himself in. And whoever had only seen Mr. Linacre in his relations with the bereaved family in Down-Town and with James Pilford, and had, moreover, been gifted with supernatural powers of seeing more than is on the surface, would have ob-

served, or, rather discovered, that when he left the October evening behind him at the street door, he also left something else—the other side of himself.

The hall, or passage, in which Mr. Linacre found himself was of a muchness with those which may be found in those houses in provincial towns which are rented at sixty pounds a year. There was a thick carpeting laid over linoleum made in imitation of tessellated pavement; it was soft and warm to the feet and warm in colour. On the right-hand side there was an article of furniture which served several purposes—hats and coats could be hung upon it, and sticks and umbrellas placed in small pens on either side of it. It had a square of bevelled plate glass let into its upper parts, and on the pediment beneath there were set forth in state a highly polished brass gong, flanked by a clothes brush and a hat brush. On the wall opposite this useful object hung a large steel engraving, which depicted the animals leaving the Ark; Noah and his family also being shown there in attitudes betokening great thankfulness that at last they could live elsewhere than in a menagerie. Beneath this were arranged two very straight-backed oak chairs, so smooth from much rubbing that any misguided person who had sat down on them would immediately have fallen off. And from the centre arch of the hall, and immediately in front of curtains which closed off the rear portions of the house, hung a brass lamp, the panels of which were in squares, lozenges, and cir-

cles of multi-coloured glass, through which there accordingly shone a soft and chastened but somewhat puzzling radiance, persons coming within its rays looking either green, blue, or pink, according to the position in which they stood.

At the sound of Mr. Linacre's knock a man had come out of a room on the right of the hall, and he now stood beneath the lamp, rubbing his hands together and bowing his head. The lamp gave a good and a strong light, despite its handicap of coloured glass, and the man was to be clearly seen, if Mr. Linacre had desired to look particularly at him, which he didn't, being already as familiar with his features as he was with his own. But any other person meeting this individual for the first time would have looked at him closely, if only for the reason that he was worth observing. And after observing him closely, it would have been a wonder if the least observant could have set him down for anything but an undertaker.

He was a man of apparently fifty years of age, of a little above the medium height, and of a spare figure; and, like Mr. Linacre, he was attired from head to foot in sober black. Like Mr. Linacre, too, he wore spotless linen; a very plain but good gold chain of slender make crossed his waistcoat; two plain gold studs showed themselves in the expanse of linen beneath his severely tied black bow; from head to foot he was a model of neatness and preciseness. His features were as precise as himself—he

was a fresh-coloured man, and his hair was already iron-grey; a thin whisker was trimly cultivated on each cheek; a somewhat thicker beard depended from his chin; his upper lip was clean shaven. At a first glance at this man it seemed as if all his character must be crystallized in that upper lip; it was like his attire, so precise, so neat, so fitting to the tightly shut mouth. But looking more closely at the man you saw that the mouth, nose, and eyes were all of a piece; the nose long and thin, the eyes set close and sharp. It seemed impossible that he could smile; when he did smile it was as if he said in the suavest and politest fashion possible, "Good-morning. When may I have the pleasure of taking your measure for a coffin?" This may have been from the fact that in a metaphorical sense Mr. Vincent Mortimer had been making coffins for people all his life, whenever he found a fitting opportunity to do so.

"Good-evening, Mortimer," said Mr. Linacre, advancing into the hall, but making no offer to shake hands with the courteous figure before him. "A coldish evening, and inclined to be damp. I hope there's a fire in my bedroom?"

"Everything has been prepared in accordance with your desires, sir," replied Mortimer. "There is a light in the room—shall I take your bag?"

"I can carry it myself," said Linacre. He passed through the curtains which the other held aside for him, and pausing at the foot of a staircase as thickly carpeted as the outer hall, snuffed the air expect-

antly. "Hah!" he said. "I hope Rachel is exerting herself, Mortimer?"

"You will find everything to your liking, I believe, sir," answered the man. "Rachel is well aware of your tastes, Mr. Linacre."

"She ought to be by this time, Mortimer, she ought to be!" said Linacre with a curious chuckle. "She ought, indeed. Well—in a quarter of an hour, then."

He walked heavily upstairs to the front bedroom on the first floor, and passing within the partly open door looked round him with the critical inspection of the man who loves warmth and comfort and the rose-leaves of a sybaritic existence. The room was richly, even luxuriously furnished, after a heavy, solid fashion; there was a bright fire burning in the grate, and before it was placed a deep arm-chair, at the side of which stood a small table whereon were set out a decanter of sherry and a glass. Mr. Linacre sighed, closed the door, set down his bag, and sinking into the arm-chair, poured himself out a glass of wine and sipped it thoughtfully as he stared at the dancing flames. He began to reflect that it is much pleasanter to do as one likes than it is to keep up appearances, but suddenly remembering that if one wants to make money it is necessary to combine a great deal of falsehood with a modicum of truth, he drank off the sherry, and having made his toilet, descended to rejoin Mr. Mortimer.

The room into which Mr. Linacre walked was

after the style of that which he had just left. There was much highly polished mahogany; much soft carpeting; many easy chairs; a glowing fire; bright lights. The aldermanic sideboard was heavily laden with silver, the walls were hung with oil-paintings which looked to be of value. At these matters, however, Mr. Linacre gave no more than a passing glance; his attention was immediately turned to the table, whereon covers were laid for two. There were spotless linen, and glittering silver, and sparkling glass on the table, and its centre was a maze of choice flowers whose fragrance pleased Mr. Linacre's wide-stretched nostrils. He looked these things over with a sharp inspection; his eyes turned from them to a wine-cooler from which the necks of various promising bottles protruded. With a sigh of anticipation that made no doubt of coming satisfaction Mr. Linacre sank into one of the deep chairs by the fire and waved Mr. Mortimer to the other.

"Sit down, Mortimer, sit down!" he commanded graciously. "No ceremony. Ah, the prospect of a bit of warm dinner, Mortimer, is very cheering after a day amongst sheep and turnips!"

"I have no doubt a day in the country conduces to appetite, sir," replied Mortimer.

"Aye, and a day in a town-office, too, Mortimer," replied Linacre with a wink. "Ledgers and papers are as good appetizers as east winds if I know aught, eh? Townsman and countryman can do justice to a good dinner once a week, what?"

"I am sure I always look forward to our reunions, sir," said Mortimer, with his grave air. "They make a pleasant change in the routine of the week."

"Especially when the rest's lived on plain cooking, eh?" said Linacre with another wink. "Plain roast and boiled and no kickshaws, what? And it's precisely half-past eight, and here's Rachel to the minute."

The door opened to admit a tall woman, simply attired in a Quaker-like gown of black, relieved by a white apron, who carried a massive silver tureen with which she advanced to the table, looking neither to the right nor the left. Her movements were so noiseless, so gliding, that she might have been shod in velvet; there was something almost spectral about her quietness. Of her age it was difficult to form a conception at first sight, for her hair was almost white—was made to appear white, in fact, by the intense blackness of her eyebrows and the eyes beneath them, set in deep cavities. Her face was the colour of old ivory: her lips had little colour, and her hands, long and thin, were as colourless as her face. Yet, slightly built as she was, and colourless as she was, there was something in this woman's appearance which denoted a reserve of strength, and in a peculiar and sudden flash of her deep-sunk eyes there was a pent-up fire which at all other times lay smouldering, ready to be fanned into flame.

"Ah, Rachel!" said Linacre, snuffing in the rich odour of the soup. "And how is Rachel?"

"I am very well, thank you, Mr. Linacre," answered the woman.

Her voice was as colourless, as thin, as wasted as herself—yet in it, as in her, there was the suggestion of some reserve strength, of something latent, and waiting. It was a refined voice, out of which something seemed to have been crushed—but not quite.

"Well, that's a blessing," said Linacre, rising and advancing upon the table. "And I hope you're sincerely thankful."

The woman left the room as noiselessly as she had entered, and the two men sat down. And Linacre served the soup without the formality of saying grace.

During the next hour the woman came and went, serving the men who sat eating and drinking at the luxuriantly spread table. The food was of the best and choicest—fish that was difficult to obtain; flesh of beast and bird that the most exacting of epicures would have delighted in; rare fruits; vintage wines. But a sharp-eyed watcher would have noticed a difference between the two men—Linacre ate and drank as if he could never be satisfied; he might have been some savage animal that, after starvation, had at last come to the chance of a full feast; he seemed to worry and to gnaw his food as if it were his mission to destroy it, and when he drank he drank in great draughts and thirstily—Mortimer, on the other hand, though he ate steadily, ate sparingly, and did little more than sip at the wine in his glass.

And while Linacre talked with every mouthful Mortimer contented himself with short and usually monosyllabic answers, always delivered in his suave, deferential voice.

The feast came to an end at last, and the woman clearing away the last vestiges of it, left the fruit and flowers in the centre of the table, and having set out a spirit-case and glasses, brought in coffee and left the men together. Linacre poured out coffee for both, helped himself liberally to brandy, passed the decanter over to his companion, and lighted a cigar from one of the many boxes on the table.

"And now then, Mortimer," he said, "having satisfied the inner man, we'll get to business. What about that affair of Benson's?"

"He hasn't paid," answered Mortimer.

"Then sell him up," said Linacre. "And at once!"

Mortimer produced a note-book from his breast-pocket and pencilled a line in it.

"Mrs. Waterhouse was in this morning," he said. "She's two months behind in her payments and she wants more time. She's had sickness in the family."

"They all have sickness in the family," said Linacre peevishly. "How do things stand—will her furniture and stock stand another month? And the principal, of course. And the extra interest?"

"Just about," replied Mortimer.

"Well, give her another month, then," said Linacre. "And if she doesn't pay then——" he smacked his hand on the table. "That'll finish it—you under-

stand. Now what about that rent from Robinson?"

Mortimer shook his head.

"Put a distress in to-morrow without fail," said Linacre. "I'll stand him no longer. Now, how's business been this week?"

Mortimer produced a bundle of papers and a cash-book and proceeded to go into details of the week's affairs in the money-lending business which under the name of the *Benevolent & Friendly Loan and Discount Society: Mr. Vincent Mortimer, Secretary and Manager*, was carried on in Clothford and some adjacent towns and was in reality the sole property of Mr. Simon Linacre, though that gentleman was never seen at the offices nor known by a living soul but Mr. Mortimer to have anything to do with it. And as the week's affairs were very satisfactory indeed, notwithstanding that a few widows and orphans had been rendered homeless and that a tradesman had hung himself out of despair, Mr. Linacre became very good-humoured, and pressed his able manager to help himself.

"I'll tell you what there is, Mortimer," he said. "I'd almost forgotten it—that affair of Belford's at Scarthington. I made it in my way to go over in that direction last week, and I had a look round his place. It's no use—if we wait longer I shall lose. Get it over—sell him up, and have done with him."

"I forgot to tell you," said Mortimer. "That's been paid—it was paid this morning."

Linacre let his cigar fall on the table. The rapa-

cious eyes beneath the straight-cut fringe bulged with incredulity.

"What!" he exclaimed. "Pooh!—can't have been—James Belford, I mean."

"The same man. But it was paid—in notes—this morning," repeated the manager. "It came by post, sir."

"Not all?—principal and interest?" asked Linacre.

"Oh, no—the full interest to date, with the added interest and fines," said Mortimer. "We can't touch him now for another half-year—he was within the time we'd given him by two days."

"Um!" said Linacre wonderingly. "The rascal must have borrowed the money from some fool or other. Well, I'll keep an eye on him, but if he doesn't pay next time, Mortimer, there'll be no grace—I reckoned up his stock, live and dead, and his furniture to a shilling. And I'll keep an eye on him, too. Now then, just ring that bell, will you?—there's a little matter I want to speak to Rachel about—and, Mortimer, I want you to listen carefully, so that you can remind her of anything I tell her that she might forget—eh!"

The manager bowed as if he quite understood his employer's meaning, and having rung the bell re-seated himself and affected to be occupied with his papers.

Rachel entered as quietly as usual. She paused within the door and fixed her eyes on Linacre.

"You rang, Mr. Linacre," she said.

Linacre laughed.

"You're wrong, Rachel. It was Mortimer there that rang," he said.

She made no answer to this, but stood motionless as a statue, still watching him. Her eyes never left his face; Linacre's eyes, on the other hand, varied in their expression, now staring at her boldly or insolently, now watching her slyly, now turning towards his manager with a wink that was meant to be jocular.

"It's no use asking you to sit down or to take a glass of wine, Rachel," he said, "because you never do either. Can you be induced to take a drop of spirits, now? Come?"

The woman's eyes flashed for a moment and there was a sudden twitching of her mouth. But in the half of a second she was as immovable as ever.

"What do you want me for, Mr. Linacre?" she asked.

"Just to tell you this," he answered. "I think it's time you'd some help, Rachel. You've too much to do."

"I want no help," she said. "I can do everything. Is there anything that I have fallen short in? Was the dinner not——"

"The dinner," said Linacre, "was as your dinners always are, perfection. You'd have heard it before now if it hadn't been! No—there aren't half-a-dozen cooks in England as good as you, Rachel. But

I think it's time you'd some help. So does Mr. Mortimer. Don't you, Mortimer?"

"I certainly think that Mrs. Weare might be the better for some help—for her own sake," said Mortimer without looking up. "To relieve her, of course, of certain duties."

"Aye, to be sure, to relieve her of certain duties," said Linacre. "That's it. Now I happen to know of a likely young woman who's just lost her father, and whose family will be glad to get her a good place. In a few days I shall send her to see you, Rachel, and you'll engage her at fifteen pounds a year—in Mr. Mortimer's name, of course. I don't appear in it, you know—I only recommend her. I'm nobody in this house but Mr. Mortimer's friend. Eh, Mortimer? Your friend who visits you once a week and whom you make heartily welcome—hah! hah! Eh?"

"Of course," said Mortimer.

"Then I'll let you know when the young woman's coming, Rachel, and you can ask her the usual questions and engage her—she's a very good character," said Linacre. "Do you understand?"

"Yes," she said slowly. "Yes—I understand."

"Then you can go," he said. "That's all. Now, Mortimer, what's next?"

II

IT WAS always one of the great events of the year to the folk Down-Town when the old gentleman who was known all over the village as the Squire, but whose property extended Down-Townwards no farther than the Cross-Roads, paid them a visit. There were certain reasons why such an event should be memorable for many months. The Squire was first of all very old—so old that he had been through the Peninsular War, and had fought and been wounded at Waterloo, and it was a common belief that the bullet which he had received then was still lodged somewhere in his anatomy. Then he was a picture to look at, dressing himself in a style never seen elsewhere, in such things as bell-topped hats of white or yellow, all of which had their brims lined with green, for the sake of his old eyes, and in tailed coats of bright blue which had gilt (most folk said real gold) buttons, and in nankeen trousers fitting very tight to his shrunk shanks, and he carried a walking cane with a tassel, and swore a good deal, and had a habit of carrying a quantity of half-crowns which he gave away generously. He was certainly very deaf, and had an ear-trumpet for use

upon occasion, but his eyes were as keen and twinkling as ever, and the mothers of the village said that nobody could tell a pretty girl or a healthy baby better than Colonel Daubeney could, even if he was as old as Methuselah.

Being younger than the Colonel, but still beyond the allotted age and very active for her years, Mrs. Daubeney was seen in Down-Town very much oftener than her husband. She was a little, gentle-eyed, gentle-voiced old lady who had a genius for benevolence and a gift for making the people upon whom she conferred benefits feel that they were doing her a personal favour to accept them. Like her husband, she, too, was to the Down-Town folk an object of wonder in the matter of attire. She always wore soft dove-coloured garments, very old-fashioned in style, but very rich in texture, with beautiful things of lace or lawn about her neck and shoulders, and she clung to the poke bonnet of the 'thirties. To look at her stepping along the street with her sweet smile and kindly old eyes, one thought of something very dainty and good that had come out of a treasure chest after laying there a long time amongst lavender and dried rose-leaves.

Knowing that Mrs. Daubeney would be certain to visit the family in its affliction, Keziah, since the day of her father's funeral, had been careful to keep the cottage in a state of extra tidiness. She was not particular about washing-day, because there was not a soul in Scarthington, either in Up-Town or Down-

Town, from the Squire himself to Stump Dick, who would have dared to approach the Lambert establishment on that day—the muffin-maker always excepted. She was therefore not surprised when Mrs. Lightowler rushed in one afternoon breathless with excitement, and only able to pant out in gasps that Mrs. Daubeney was coming down the road at that very minute. Keziah, who was ironing, looked round with a critical eye.

“Well, if she’s coming here, she can come,” she said tartly. “She’ll none find naught no cleaner than what this is, neither in Up-Town nor Down-Town—’specially i’ Down-Town.”

“No, I’m sure!” agreed Mrs. Lightowler. “But th’ old Colonel’s with her, Keziah.”

“Well, there’s chairs for both on ’em,” said Keziah, going on with her work. “They can’t seat theirsens i’ more than one apiece.”

The muffin-maker thereupon retired, and she had scarcely retreated to the safety of her own cottage, and begun frantic preparations to make it tidy in case the quality called on her, when Keziah heard the Colonel’s walking cane tapping up the flagged walk of the garden, and the Colonel’s voice already raised in comment. He had a fashion of thinking aloud, and also of repeating his words after the fashion of his late Majesty King George the Third, and when he went to church he was a source of great anxiety to the parson and of much merriment to the younger members of the congregation.

"Very neat—very neat—very neat, I'm sure, Mrs. Daubeney—does 'em great credit, great credit, great credit, ma'am," the Colonel was saying. "Well looked after. Well looked after, ma'am, eh, eh, eh? Um—ah!—anybody at home there—anybody at home—anybody at home, eh?"

"Will you please to walk in, sir?" said Keziah, appearing at the door and exchanging a glance of understanding with Mrs. Daubeney, who was smiling and nodding at her behind the Colonel.

"Walk in—walk in, eh—yes, yes, to be sure, thank ye. Lambert's daughter, eh? Here's Mrs. Daubeney come to see you—wants condole with you on your father's death. Sad thing—sad thing—sad thing—quite a young man, Lambert—quite a young man—remember him being born. What's your name, eh? Keziah, isn't it? Any steps, Keziah?—no steps—no steps—no steps. Good job, that—don't like steps—too old, too old. Mrs. Daubeney, ma'am, why don't you walk in, eh? Keziah holding door open for you, ma'am—holding door open, you know."

Mrs. Daubeney and Keziah engineered the Colonel to the hearth, and seated him in a cushioned elbow-chair, wherefrom, having sought and found his eyeglass, and fixed it in his right eye, he surveyed his surroundings, and, while his wife and Keziah conversed in low tones informed himself, quite oblivious of their presence, that it was damned snug and devilish comfortable, after which he took snuff, and became alive to other matters than his own thoughts.

"How's your mother—how's your mother?" he asked abruptly.

"She's not so well to-day, sir, thank you," answered Keziah. "She has her good days and her bad days, Colonel Daubeney."

"Just so—just so—just so!" said the Colonel. "Like me—like me! East winds get at me, eh? Can't stand 'em—can't stand 'em. Nice and warm in here, Keziah—none of those confounded draughts. Mrs. Daubeney, ma'am, why the devil do we have such draughts at the Hall—eh, eh, eh?"

"It's because the rooms are so large and the house so old, my love," answered Mrs. Daubeney. "I came down, my dear," she continued, seeing the Colonel turn again to his snuff-box, "to hear if you have decided anything about your sister, because the place I mentioned to you is still open, and she may have it if she chooses."

"Why, ma'am, there hasn't been anything decided," replied Keziah, who, now that she had got her visitors seated, had resumed her ironing. "Of course, there's been a deal to do since my poor father met his end, and though we have talked matters over, me and our Michael, there's naught been settled. It's very kind of you, ma'am, and there's naught better that me and Michael could like than that Mia should go to the Hall, for she'd be under good care and we should be able to keep an eye on her ourselves. But to tell you the truth, Mrs. Daubeney," concluded Keziah, with a vicious stamp of

the iron on the final fold of a handkerchief, "our Mia's a very difficult girl to deal with, and there it is!"

"Oh, my dear!" said the gentle Mrs. Daubeny. "And she such a pretty and well-behaved girl!"

"It 'ud happen be a deal better, ma'am, if she were as foul as the Witch of Endor was," said Keziah with grim asperity. "And as for behaviour, well, that's as may be. I don't call it behavin' well to leave me to do all the work of this house while she admires herself i' th' lookin' glass and tries her new hats on, front side, back side, and every side she can think on!"

"I hope Mia is not idle," said Mrs. Daubeny. "If so, she can't take after her family, Keziah."

Keziah sniffed.

"Mia never was like none of us, ma'am," she answered. "There's no denyin' that she's a good-lookin' gel, and there may be directions in which she could do something, but she doesn't like a quiet life. The truth is, Mrs. Daubeny, Mia wants to go and live in a town. The country's too quiet for her."

Mrs. Daubeny sighed. Her quiet soul shrank from the bustle of the market-place.

"But what can she know of towns, Keziah?" she asked. "Why, I don't suppose she has ever seen a town—I mean a large town."

"Why, she's none seen much, of course," replied Keziah, "but her and that there Hetty Green, in Up-Town yonder, once went to spend a few days with

Hetty's cousin in Clothford, and ever since then she's always been mad on going to live in a town. Young gels is that way, Mrs. Daubeny, now-a-days; they're restless."

"I suppose Mia hasn't a sweetheart?" asked Mrs. Daubeny. "But of course, she can't have! She's too young."

"Too young!" said Keziah. "Nay, ma'am, I think they're none on 'em too young for that i' these days; they seem to start courting as soon as they're in long frocks."

The Colonel, who had been wandering from the Peninsular War to the vexed question of draughts in his own house, heard this and indulged in laughter, until, catching his wife's eye, he devoted himself to his snuff-box again, and tried to remember a forgotten incident of Waterloo.

"But as it so happens, ma'am," continued Keziah, "Mia has a sweetheart—leastways there's a young man that's after her, and very fond he is of her, an' all."

"And who is that, Keziah?" asked Mrs. Daubeny.

"Reuben Gaunt, ma'am—the young man that's at Mr. Hopkinson's farm," answered Keziah. "You'll be sure to have seen him—he's been there a year."

"Oh, yes, I know Reuben," said Mrs. Daubeny. "A very nice, steady young man, and good-looking, too. But, Keziah, that ought to make Mia wish to stay in the village—that is, if she cares for Reuben."

"Aye, well, nobody can make gels out now-a-days, ma'am," said Keziah. "It seems to me that it's the men that does all the caring, and the gels—well, I don't know what they do. Of course, Mia walks out now and then with Reuben, and they go to church together, but——"

"But you don't know whether she cares for him?" said Mrs. Daubeney.

"That's about it, ma'am," replied Keziah. "She's all for this town business. It strikes me that when her and Hetty Green were at Clothford they went to the theayter and such-like—I gather it from what bits of talk I've heard pass between them. And of course, young gels is carried away. You see, Mrs. Daubeney, my poor father spoiled Mia. I was never well-favoured—and I'm none sorry, for I'm sure I've enough to do in this house and wi' my mother without thinkin' about men and matrimony and such-like—but she were a beauty from being a child, as you know, and he were partial to good looks. And of course, she is spoiled."

Mrs. Daubeney sighed. A spoiled young village beauty was not exactly the sort of stuff out of which to make a steady and dependable parlour-maid.

"I suppose Mia is not at home?" she said, glancing around her. "I should like to have spoken to her myself."

"It's rarely that she is at home at this time, ma'am," answered Keziah. "She goes Up-Town to see her friends or to help Mrs. Gouldsbury—it's

dull here for her, and my mother is generally asleep of an afternoon."

Mrs. Daubeney sighed again.

"Well, Keziah, you must talk to her," she said. "And—perhaps it would be a good thing to get the young man to talk to her. There is no immediate necessity to fill the place at the Hall, and I'll keep it open a little. If you can get her to come there, Keziah, it will be such a good thing for her. The temptations in town, Keziah, are, I understand, dreadful!"

"I know naught about 'em, ma'am," answered Keziah. "There's enough towns and cities for me in this here cottage without wantin' to see ought further. But I'm greatly obliged to you, Mrs. Daubeney—I'll do what I can, and I'll get both Reuben and Michael to talk to Mia."

Mrs. Daubeney then recalled the Colonel from his martial reveries, and told him it was time to go. The Colonel went reluctantly; Keziah's bright fireside, he said, was much more to his liking than the draughty rooms at the Hall, and he left protesting that he would build a cottage in his pleasure grounds and live in it till the end.

III

THAT evening, Keziah, all her work done for the day, the invalid mother bestowed for the night, the hearth swept up and all things in order, took her daily recreation, which was to mend the family linen or do plain sewing. She sat at the table in the middle of the living room, the newly trimmed lamp casting a ring of light over the socks and stockings which she was about to darn, and on a tract, which, having only arrived that afternoon, she was anxious to read in the intervals of her occupation, and had therefore propped up against her work-basket in such a position that she could turn to it and take in a portion at a time. The tract had been left by James Belford's youngest daughter, who from infancy had been trained to deliver similar messages every week to the inhabitants of Down-Town; it was what Keziah considered a taking tract, being entitled *The Miserable Sinner's Portion*, and having upon its front page a rough woodcut of an attenuated individual being handed over to the care of a sort of Indian armed with a trident and ornamented with a forked tail. She was deep in the enjoyment of a description of the lake of brimstone and sulphur, and was reflecting that it must be pretty full by that time, when

a light tap at the door heralded the entrance of Reuben Gaunt.

"Evening, Keziah," said Reuben, removing his cap and taking a glance around the living room. "It's a bit coldish outside. I expect Michael's none in?"

"You expect right then, lad," answered Keziah. "'Cause he isn't."

Reuben moved to a chair, sat down, laid his cap on his knees, and twiddled his thumbs. His face was very shiny with soap and much rubbing with a rough towel, and he wore his second-best coat and waist-coat and a clean collar, and had polished his boots—this being his usual evening toilet when he went out to pay calls.

"And Mia's none in, neither," remarked Keziah, looking up from an extra-spiced paragraph about the fiery furnace. "Mia's none been in since dinner-time."

"Aw!" said Reuben. "Why—where might she be?"

Keziah sniffed and tossed her head.

"Nay, I don't know!" she answered. "Hetty Green's, very like."

Reuben shuffled his feet.

"I don't like Mia goin' so much to Hetty Green's," he said stoutly. "There's overmuch soft carryin's on at Hetty Green's."

Keziah shot him a swift glance and secretly admired him.

"What ha' you gotten to do wi' where Mia goes, my lad?" she asked.

Reuben flushed and looked awkward. He followed the pilgrimage of a belated fly across the ceiling and twiddled his thumbs harder than ever.

"Why, of course, you know, Keziah," he said desperately. "Of course, I aim at weddin' Mia."

"Oh, you do, do you?" said Keziah. "And I wonder what this world's comin' to when bairns like you talk about weddin' as if it were no more nor buyin' a new pair o' boots!"

"Nay, come, come, Keziah!" said Reuben. "Nay—I'm none such a bairn as all that. I'm goin' i' five-an'-twenty. An' I saved some brass an' all. Keziah—I can furnish a cottage and have money left over. Michael knows about it," he added reflectively. "He said we owt to wait a piece, and I were willin'. And now 'at your poor father's dead——"

"Well?" said Keziah sharply.

"Why, I thowt, d'ye see—I thowt, Keziah, 'at—why, of course, I thowt that if we were wed there'd be—nay, I'm no hand at explainin' owt!" said Reuben despairingly. "I thowt, d'ye see——"

"You thought there'd be one mouth less to feed in this house, lad," she said, not unkindly. "Reuben—has Mia ever said that she'd wed you?"

Reuben leaned back in his chair and stared at her and then looked fearfully at the door.

"Eh, dear me, no!" he replied. "I—I never axed her—yet!"

"How do you know she would, then?" asked Keziah.

Reuben rubbed his head.

"I—I thowt 'at she might be inclined that way," he said. "We've kept company together, as you know, Keziah. And, of course, when a young woman keeps company with a young man, why, nat'rally—eh, dear, Keziah!" he exclaimed suddenly interrupting himself with visible agitation. "You don't mean for to say that you don't think she'd have me? Eh—I been that fond on her—aye, ever since I first seen her!"

"Now then, don't take on, lad," replied Keziah. "I think neither one thing nor t'other. But Mia's very young, Reuben, and she's a bit—well, flighty, and——"

Reuben put out a hand.

"I weern't have nowt said agen her!" he exclaimed stoutly. "No—not by nobody!"

"Who wants to say owt agen her, ye great soft thing!" retorted Keziah. "I say she's young, and a bit flighty, as all lasses is. An' she wants to go to service in a town."

"I know she's great on livin' in a town," said Reuben regretfully. "That were with her goin' to stay in Clothford wi' Hetty Green."

"Well, then, if you've got any say over her, you must try to get her to stop away from towns," said Keziah. "There's a grand place for her at the Hall

—Mrs. Daubeny's been here herself this afternoon about it and she'll keep it open for her—it 'ud be the best thing in the world for her, Reuben——”

“It would so!” answered Reuben thoughtfully.

“——aye, and Mrs. Daubeny thinks well of you, my lad,” continued Keziah, “and she knows you're sweet on Mia, and——”

Just then Mia came in; the autumn evening had added a glow to her naturally bright colour; at sight of her poor Reuben felt more love-sick than ever. Having none of the airs and graces of the polite, he neither rose from his seat nor offered his lady-love one; instead, he said “Evenin', Mia—it keeps cold-ish,” and remained staring at her and twiddling his thumbs.

“Oh, you're there, are you?” said Mia unconcernedly, surveying each with dispassionate interest as she took off her hat and jacket and carefully placed them on a chair.

“Yes, we are here, Mia Lambert, and I wonder where else you'd expect us to be!” answered Keziah with some asperity. “An' I wonder, too, where you've been ever since near one o'clock this afternoon, and coming home at this time i' th' darkness? Here's Mrs. Daubeny been down o' purpose from the Hall to see you, and the Colonel with her, and you not in.”

“I didn't know Mrs. Daubeny was coming nor the old Colonel neither, and I didn't want to see them,”

answered Mia, who had already advanced to the small looking glass which hung against the wall and was patting her hair into shape. "What did she want, Keziah?"

"What did she want, indeed!" snorted the elder sister. "And you to speak of your betters in that light way. Old Colonel, indeed!"

"Well, he is old," said Mia. "He's very old. Isn't he, Reuben?"

"I should say—if I were axed, mind—that he were old," replied Reuben, with an apologetic and deferential glance at Keziah. "Yes, I should say he were very old, were the old patriarch—meanin' no offence, of course. But of course, them as is old, is old, just th' same as them as is young, is young. Aw, yes, I think he's old."

"Well, I said he was old," said Mia, sitting down by the hearth and taking the cat on her lap. "And he is old."

"I've no patience wi' such soft talk," snapped Keziah. "Who said he weren't old? I alluded to your careless manner o' speakin', Mia Lambert. And Mrs. Daubeney wants to know if you're willin' to take that under parlour-maid place. She's set her heart on your having it, and she'll keep it open for you for a piece, and——"

"Well, she needn't, Keziah," said the girl, "because I don't want it and I won't have it. I've said so a hundred times. I'm not going to stop in Scarthington, so there!"

Reuben felt his heart grow heavy as lead. He looked at Mia with the appealing eyes of dumb affection, but Mia was playing with the cat, around whose neck she had tied a blue ribbon.

"Oh, indeed!" exclaimed Keziah. "Not going to stop at Scarthington, aren't you? And where are you going, Miss, I should like to know. Up to London town, I expect, to see t' Queen, same as t' cat did. I never heard such soft talk. Howsomever, I'm none goin' to listen to no more on it just now for I promised James Belford's wife to step across there and show her that new knittin' stitch, an I'm away. And if my mother calls, mind you go up that instant minute, Mia Lambert, and if she wants her gruel it's in that there brass pan on t' hob, and it'll want warmin', and mind you don't burn it as you have done before to-day, for burnt gruel's neither here nor there for a poorly body, and I can't make no more to-night, so now!"

Mia made no more reply to these admonitions than if she had been deaf, and when Keziah had left the cottage she betrayed no consciousness of Reuben's presence, but continued to play with the cat, which, being little more than a kitten, was disposed to respond to her whim. But after a period of dead silence, interrupted only by the rhythmic ticking of the grandfather clock, she suddenly turned the full battery of her pansy eyes on Reuben, who immediately felt as if cold water were running down his spine and his breath forsaking his body.

"Why don't you smoke your pipe, Reuben?" she said.

Reuben shifted uneasily in his chair; he was relieved when she turned her attention again to the cat.

"Well, I weren't thinkin' partik'lar about smokin' just then, Mia," he said, "at least, I'm in no hurry—I can smoke one as I go home. No—smokin' wasn't in my mind."

"What was in it, then?" she asked, half mischievously.

Reuben cleared his throat, which seemed to him to have become pretty much as if a fog had got into it.

"I were thinkin' about what Keziah said," he answered. "About what Mrs. Daubeney said, you know."

"Well, what about it?" demanded the girl sharply.

Reuben betrayed signs of great mental discomfort—so great indeed that they affected him physically. He twisted about in his chair; looked at the ceiling; then at the floor, and sighed profoundly.

"I could like that you could see your way to taking that place at the Hall, Mia," he blurted out at last. "It's a good place, and——"

But Mia stopped him before he could get any further.

"What have you got to do with it?" she demanded with a sudden flash of the eye that would have warned a wiser man. "The impudence! Do you

think because you've walked me out a time or two, and taken me to church of a Sunday night that you've got any say in it? 'Cause you haven't, Reuben Gaunt—so there!"

It was only a more direct way of putting what Keziah had put to him before, but the words and the look knocked Reuben backwards as thoroughly as an ox is felled by the slaughterer. He had never seen Mia in this mood—he looked in astonishment from her to the kitten with which she was playing, and a curious likeness between them suddenly dawned upon his consciousness—both could purr and both could scratch!

"I were only thinking it would be a good thing, Mia," he said lamely. "She's a right good sort, is old Mrs. Daubeney——"

"Who said she wasn't?" demanded Mia. "But I'm not going there. I'm not going to stop in a place like Scarthington all my life, I can tell you. Why shouldn't I go and learn dressmaking, or something like that, in one of the big towns——"

"It's a poorish life in them big towns, Mia," interrupted Reuben, very untactfully. "I knew a chap 'at got a job i' Paulsbury, drivin' carts for t' railway company, and at a rare good wage, too, but gow! he said he couldn't breathe in t' place!"

Mia's pretty face moulded itself into an expression of supreme disdain. But Reuben, failing to comprehend her, sailed forward, full course towards the rocks.

"An' if you went away, Mia," he said, "why, of course, we shouldn't see naught-like so much of each other, and——"

"What by that?" demanded Mia, almost fiercely. Reuben's jaw dropped.

"I mean—I mean we couldn't—couldn't keep company, like," he stammered, growing as red as a peony.

"Well, who wants to keep company?" said Mia. "You talk as if you'd only to ask and to have, Reuben Gaunt. You——"

The kitten, suddenly pinched or squeezed, turned and shot out a needle-like claw from a velvet-soft sheath. Mia screamed, smacked the offender with a vigorous hand, and threw it head over heels across the kitchen. She lifted a scratched wrist to her rose-bud lips.

Reuben's peony-red turned to a grey-white. He gave the girl and the kitten a queer look, hesitated a moment, and then, crushing his cap in his hand, rose from his chair and left the cottage in silence.

IV

THAT evening after James Belford had changed his working-clothes for his market-suit, had shaved, washed, and eaten his humble supper, he took some papers from the old bureau in which he kept such small private matters as he possessed, and crossing the road from his small farmstead went up the stone-paved grinnel which led to the row of cottages on the elm-crowned ridge. He wanted to see Thomas Green, and he knew that Thomas would by that time have completed his day's round with donkey and cart, had his supper and settled to his pipe by his own fireside. On knocking at the door and receiving the old market-gardener's bidding to enter he found him seated alone, the lamp at his elbow, a pair of very large spectacles on his prominent nose, reading a newspaper which he had brought home with him from some point of his day's journey. In the half-light the resemblance between him and the pictures of the Great Duke were more pronounced than ever.

"Come your ways in, come your ways in, Mestur Belford," he said, half-rising and pointing to a chair near his own. "I'm all by myself, ye see—our 'Becca's gone up-town for an hour or so, and so

you and me can have our bit o' talk quiet like, sir. A grey sort o' day, Mestur Belford."

"It's been a brighter day than what I've known for a long time, Mestur Green, thanks to you, sir," said Belford, letting his tall and spare frame gradually fold itself into the chair. "I've gone about with a heart-and-a-half to-day, sir—all due to your kindness."

"Say no more, Mestur Belford, say no more!" said Old Wellington. "So you made it all right, sir?"

Belford drew his papers from his pocket and laid them on the table. He selected one and handed it to the market-gardener, who examined it with the close attention of one not used to strange documents.

"Aye, that'll be the receipt for the two last half-year's interest, of course," he said, handing it back. "There seems to be a deal of additions to it, like, Mestur Belford—what might they mean?"

"Why, you see, Mestur Green," replied Belford, "if so be as you don't pay your interest, they fine you for not doing so, and then they charge you interest on that interest what hasn't been paid. And of course it all adds up, sir, especially when you're to let it run on, as I've had, for a matter of a whole year."

Old Wellington picked up the document again and bent his crag-like nose over it.

"I'm no great hand at figures, Mestur Belford," he said. "I keep no books 'sides a little memoranda book that my 'Becca puts a few o' things down in,

such as what we lay out and what we take in, and so happen I'm no judge about these here affairs. But it seems to me, sir, 'at these fines and extra interest's more than what the interest itself is."

"It is so," replied Belford, sighing heavily. "Aye, it is so, Mestur Green. It's a way they have, d'ye see? They explained it to me that that were the only way they could do it—of course, I don't understand their ways of dealing and they've such a deal of fine talk about financial affairs and so on that it muddles me to go there."

"How much did ye borrow to start with, Mestur Belford?" inquired Old Wellington.

"A hundred and fifty pounds, sir," answered Belford, "but I didn't get that there amount in money—there were the first year's interest ta'en off, and twelve pound for expenses—that come, at twenty-five per cent interest, to forty-nine pound ten shilling, including the expenses, Mestur Green. One hundred pound ten shilling were what I actually handled i' cash, sir."

"An' what ha' you actually paid 'em back, Mestur Belford?" asked the market-gardener.

Belford pulled out a stump of lead-pencil and laboriously made some calculations on the back of the envelope in which he had brought his papers over from the farm.

"Why, sir, it's five years this Martlemas since I borrowed," he said, "and including the first year's interest, as were deducted, and fines now and again

for not payin' down on th' nail, like, and extra interest, I've paid 'em back exactly two hundred and eleven pound."

"An' the principal's still owin'—a hundred and fifty pound!" said Old Wellington.

"Yes, sir," replied the farmer. "The principal's still owin', of course."

The market-gardener edged his elbow-chair to the fire and seizing the poker stirred the fire vigorously, as if he were attacking some Bastille-like menace to liberty.

"Eh, dear, dear!" he said, turning again to his visitor. "It's a bad look-out is that there, Mestur Belford! This Mestur Mortimer, now, I reckon he's a money-lender?"

"Why, of course, sir," replied Belford. "I knew naught about no Mestur Mortimer when I went there. I saw the advertisement in the paper of this here Benevolent and Friendly Society, and of course we all know what them words is intended to mean. Mestur Mortimer were friendly enough at first—he just sent a person over to vally my stock and furnitur', and I had the money in a day or two. Of course, as I say, I aimed at payin' it all back within a year—that's what I aimed at!"

"Aye, for sure!" said Old Wellington, sighing. "For sure ye would!"

"But ye know, Mestur Green," continued Belford, "what is a little farmer to do i' these days? If such as Mestur Truscott and Mestur Hopkinson, Up-

Town yonder, grummles as they do about finding it hard work to make ends meet on their five and six hundred acre farms, what about me wi' my bit o' land? I can't get nowt at it as I should do—there's naught to be made at my bit o' wheat, nor barley neither, and I've had naught but ill-luck wi' cattle and pigs. And I don't see how things is goin' to improve, neither."

"No, nor me," agreed Old Wellington. "And what's more, they weern't."

"There were a man came along one day when I were gettin' my rakin's," Belford went on. "I had a talk to him across t' hedgerow about farmin'—he were a London gentleman, so of course he knew all about it——"

"Aye, for sure he would!" laughed Old Wellington. "They allus know all about it, does t' London gentlemen."

"He were an artist gentleman," continued Belford, "with a deal of interest i' farming matters. He said I owt to go in for dairyin'—milk and cream and butter, and such-like—and poultry farmin'—and he said he knew a man i' one o' them south-country parts 'at were clearin' two hundred a year profit i' that way."

"Aye, aye!" chuckled the market-gardener. "I've heard th' same tales, Mestur Belford, I've heard the same tales!"

"But I ses to him, 'If I did start that sort o' thing,' I ses, 'where am I to find a market for my

stuff?' I ses. 'There isn't what you might call a big town for thirty mile, and there's no railway station nearer than seven mile, so where should I be,' I ses, you know, Mestur Green. Then he started on to talk about light railways, and sendin' eggs and butter by t' parcel post and such-like, but I told him that them things were in what they term the Millenyum and not o' much use to me. No—it's hard grindin' for little farmers, Mestur Green, it is indeed!"

"Aye, an' it'll be hard grindin' for ye, Mestur Belford, to get rid o' this big load that ye've ta'en on your back!" said Old Wellington. "Eh, my lad, we must get rid o' that, somehow. We mun try to think o' some plan, Mestur Belford—we mun see if there isn't somebody that'll come to the rescue."

Belford sighed heavily and shook his head.

"I don't know who'd do it, Mestur Green, sir," he said. "There were a gentleman i' the village recently as I mentioned the matter to—it were about the overdue interest that, sir, and he promised to do his best, but I don't know whether he wrote to Mestur Mortimer or no—that were Mestur Linacre."

The market-gardener turned sharply in his chair.

"Who?" he said.

"Mestur Linacre, ye know, Mestur Green—one o' th' circuit stewards he is, only, living right on t' other side o' th' circuit he doesn't oft come our way," replied Belford. "Farms at Yewford yonder; he's said to be comfortably off in his worldly goods,

though I expect even the well-to-do can find plenty o' uses for what they have."

Old Wellington re-filled his pipe, staring thoughtfully at the fire.

"I don't want to say nowt agen nobody, Mestur Belford," he said, "an' 'specially agen a member o' society as sits i' high places. I been a joined Methodist and a member o' society for nigh on to forty year, and it's not likely that I should speak evil. But I never could abide Mestur Linacre, sir, never—he allus makes me think o' them i' t' Good Book who broadened their phylacteries and lengthened their garments."

"Eh, dear, dear!" said Belford, genuinely astonished. "And him such a gift in the pulpit, and such a power in prayer. I'm sure if you could ha' heard him engage in prayer i' Lambert's cottage t' other day——"

"I've heard t' man both pray and preach," said Old Wellington, who was plainly discomposed by the mention of Linacre's name, "and I don't want to hear him again, Mestur Belford. I wouldn't prejudice him i' your eyes for the world, and very like I'm wrong, for we're all liable to make mistakes, but Mestur Linacre's a man I never could thole—I reklect his comin' here to preach once before you came to the village, and he made me think o' one o' them characters in old Bunyan's Pilgrim; I can't remember which, but it weren't one o' th' good 'uns, Mestur Belford. No—an' if I were you, I wouldn't ask no

favours from Mestur Linacre—I've a little notion i' my mind," concluded the old man, rising and offering his hand to the farmer, "a little notion that I think'll be of service to you—we'll talk about it later on. And now then I must away to my bed, for I've to be up i' th' mornin' at five o'clock."

When Belford had gone and the market-gardener had turned down the lamp and retired, the little house-place remained deserted for a while. Then a cautious hand lifted the latch, a face looked in, and a figure stole across the floor and sat down in Old Wellington's chair. It sat there a long time in silence; sat there until Michael and Rebecca came back and entered and turned up the light, to discover Reuben, looking a picture of despair.

"I'm in sore trouble—sore trouble!" he said, gazing at them with the trust of a child. "Mia won't have naught to say to me, Michael and 'Becca. And—I've loved her ever since I first set eyes on her!"

V

AT THAT moment neither Michael nor Rebecca were in what local parlance would have termed the best fettle for administering consolation to love-sick swains. On the way home from Up-Town, whither Michael had repaired to fetch Rebecca from a friend's house, they had been discussing—not for the first nor the second time—the position in which Joseph's sudden death had placed them, and they had been unable to see any way out of their difficulties, and were in consequence somewhat doleful and cast down. It seemed to them, simple-natured as they were, a strange, unexplainable thing that just as life was beginning to assume a roseate hue, as a vista of liberty and prosperity was being opened before them, the complexion of everything should be changed and themselves left unable to see further than the necessities of the moment. As they were by nature inclined to serious-mindedness and the religious habit, both felt as much surprised at this change of future as a good and trusting child would, whose face was suddenly smacked by a hitherto kindly and loving nurse; they remained wondering vaguely why a blow had fallen upon them, and had only a dumb and shapeless belief that there must have been some reason for it.

The truth was that Lambert's fatal fall from the stack had broken in upon a little scheme of which nobody but Michael, Rebecca, and Rebecca's father knew anything. If all had gone well the three had intended emigrating to Canada in the coming spring. Old Wellington was as much pleased at the prospect as the young people; it was he, indeed, who had first suggested the idea. He was then not much over sixty; he had saved a few hundred of pounds, having always been a careful man who had few expenses, and he had neither kith nor kin, as far as he knew, beyond 'Becca. He had always cherished a notion to travel; had read a good deal about this Promised Land across the seas, and talked to people who had been there; it seemed to him that as Michael was a promising young man with ideas and ambition there might be the founding of a family of substance and prosperity on the virgin soil of the West. Michael and Rebecca had entered into this idea with enthusiasm; from the time when he first put his hands to the stilts of a plough, Michael had always had what his compeers called big notions; he wanted to be and to do something more than the folk around him, and to that end he had saved every penny that he could, and had now a nice round sum lying in the bank. It had never dawned upon him, nor upon anybody, that a mere accident might force him into the position of being whole and sole breadwinner to his family.

And now here was Reuben, his friend, apparently,

or, rather, very evidently, in deep concern. Michael slapped him on the shoulder.

"Nay, come, Reuben, lad!" he said, "never take on. What's th' matter? Ha' ye an' Mia been havin' a fratch, like? Ne'er heed that, lad—ye'll ha' many a one before ye've done!"

He laughed and winked at Rebecca as he said this, but Reuben shook his head mournfully.

"It's none that, Michael, lad," he said. "I could stand that there. Nay, I thowt she cared a bit—but I'm nowt to her—nowt!"

"Happen you've been rather too quick, Reuben," said Rebecca. "Mia's only a young girl, you know."

But Reuben was too far gone in his misery to hear reason or excuse. He dug his hands farther into his breeches' pockets, and let his head sink lower on his chest.

"I know what it is!" he muttered doggedly. "It all comes o' Mia and yon there Hetty Green goin' to bide i' Clothford for a week. They got goin' to t' theayter, and I expect there were some o' them town chaps made up to 'em, wi' their fine clothes and grand talk, and it's turned their heads—that's what it all is. Mia's never been t' same to me since."

"What is he talking about, Michael?" asked Rebecca.

"But I'll tell ye what it is, Michael," continued Reuben, rising to his feet, and nodding his head vigorously. "If so be as Mia goes to town, I shall gi' Mestur Hopkinson back-word—I'm none fixed up

definite wi' him as yet—and I shall go where she goes and get a job at railway porterin' or van-drivin', or summat—I'm none goin' to let her out o' my sight i' one o' them big towns—I've heard tell o' what they are for young lasses, and——"

Michael laid his great hand on Reuben's shoulder and shook him.

"Ho'd thy wisht, Reuben, lad!" he said. "Thou's talkin' soft. Who's said aught about Mia goin' to any big town? I'm t' maister in that family, now 'at my father's gone, and I shall have to be consulted about aught that's important. I know naught about Mia going away from home—come, now!"

But Reuben remembered the look in Mia's eyes when she was talking to Keziah, and he shook his head.

"I'll be no good, Michael," he said, making for the door. "She'll none care for aught that you say—she'll have her own way, will Mia, if I know aught. But I shall keep my eye on her, so there, 'cause I'm not one o' them 'at's quick to change. Good-night, lad—and good-night, 'Becca. I come in because—why, of course, ye know 'at ye're all t' friends I have i' this place."

"Here, stop a bit, Reuben!" exclaimed Michael.

"Come back and——"

But Reuben shook his head sorrowfully and went out into the darkness, and they heard his heavy steps go on quicker down the stone-paved ginnel.

Michael turned to Rebecca and stared at her in wondering silence.

"I hope there's going to be no trouble with Mia, 'Becca," he said, after a while. "I know my poor father spoiled her, and I were never for letting her go with yon Hetty Green to Clothford a piece back—it's done naught but unsettle her."

"There's the place open at the Hall for her, Michael," answered Rebecca. "You should get her to take that. She'd be well looked after and well done to, there. But you'll see Reuben's right, Michael—if Mia's made up her mind to leave home, she'll go."

Michael rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"I'll speak to her myself," he said. "I'll speak th' first time I've the chance. I'd rather aught had happened than Reuben yonder had been so upset—he thinks all t' world o' Mia."

The chance of speaking to his younger sister came to Michael there and then. Going home a few minutes later he found that Keziah had already gone to bed, and that Mia was still sitting up. She had taken a seat on the low fender, where, leaning comfortably back against the broad upright of the chimney-piece, she rested herself in warmth while she read a novelette in which were set forth the adventures of a village maiden who eventually married an Earl. The cat, forgetful and forgiving of the earlier doings of the evening, lay contentedly in her lap, purring loudly.

Michael, following his usual custom, pulled off his boots, thrust his feet into an ancient pair of slippers, and went into the lean-to shed to forage for some supper. Coming back presently with a plate on which reposed a thick hunch of bread, a lump of bacon, and a large onion, he sat down at the table and began to eat, watching his sister out of his eye-corners. Up till then it had never occurred to him to notice Mia particularly; he knew that she was considered to be the village beauty, but, brotherlike, he had never been affected by the knowledge—besides he had always been too busy one way or another to spend much time at home. He knew that his father had been very proud of the girl, and that she was much admired, but he himself, until Reuben Gaunt had opened his heart to him, had merely regarded her as a child. Now, looking at her narrowly, he suddenly recognized that Mia was a very fine young woman—just as suddenly he found himself wondering how it was that she was so unlike the rest of them. His own good looks, to which he never gave a thought, were of the homely sort; Keziah was plain to a fault, if not actually ill-favoured; there had been another daughter, between himself and Keziah, who was no better looking than the elder sister. His mother had been so long confined to her bed, and had become so changed and wasted, that Michael could not remember what sort of looking woman she had been in her prime—as for his father, he was a cheery-faced, good-tempered man, who stood a good

height and had a good figure, but was otherwise undistinguished. It now struck him with a species of wonder which made him half-afraid that Mia was a beauty—dress her up, he said to himself, like some of the young ladies who sometimes came to visit the Hall, and she would look like—well, not like a labourer's daughter. Michael vaguely realized that beauty is not always a desirable gift in the lowly born woman.

"What're you going to do about going to Mrs. Daubeny, Mia?" he asked abruptly, swallowing a mighty mouthful of bread and bacon. "It'll be a grand place for you, that."

Mia looked up and yawned, disclosing a set of white and even teeth that would have made many of her richer sisters envious.

"I'm not going there," she replied. "I've said all along I wouldn't go—I don't want to go."

Michael had always been noted for the possession of a good temper—although he was doubtful and troubled, he scarcely knew about what, he smiled indulgently at Mia.

"You might do worse, lass!" he said.

"And I might do a good deal better," answered his sister. "You don't mean to stop in this place all your life, Michael."

As this was perfectly true, Michael stared at the girl in astonishment.

"How do you know, Mia?" he asked.

Mia nodded at him.

"I know!" she said. "What do you go to the night-school for in winter, and what are you always reading books and doing sums for? Folks that want to stop in Scarthington all their lives don't do anything."

Michael felt this to be so true that he scarcely knew what to say next. After more attention to his supper he put a direct question.

"Well, lass, what do you want to do?" he asked.

"Just what you want to do—something better," she replied. "What'll you do, Michael, if you stop here?—you'll be a shepherd all your life. What should I do if I went to the Hall? However, I'm not going, neither for Keziah, nor Reuben Gaunt, nor anybody. You know very well, yourself, there's better places than Scarthington in the world."

With that she went up the stairs to the chamber which she and Keziah shared, leaving Michael staring at the remains of his supper. He slowly recognized that this sister of his, child as he had thought her, had more sense than he had supposed. She was right, he said to himself; he, too, wanted a wider world.

VI

THE ancient farmstead in which Mr. Simon Linacre lived the other and larger part of his existence was a grey and forlorn-looking house which stood on the outskirts of an equally grey and desolate village. Yewford-in-the-Wold, indeed, was one of those places into which nothing of life and colour ever seems to come. Lying in the midst of a flat, monotonous, almost treeless country, in which dykes and ditches took the place of pleasant hedgerows, it was plain that it only existed because it was necessary for the folk who tilled the soil around it to have somewhere to dwell. It was on the highroad to nowhere, and consequently nothing of any note ever passed through it. Two miles away a great and famous trunk-road ran north and south; turning off from that by what was little better than a by-lane the adventurous traveller came to Yewford-in-the-Wold. There he found a single street of mean grey houses, a pond covered with green slime, a farmhouse or two, of the stamp of that in which Belford lived at Down-Town, a four-square meeting-house, in which Mr. Linacre often held forth on Sundays, and the ancient house, Yewford Grange, in which he dwelt. The whole place seemed to be ringed off from the outer world by a fence of vague imagination, as un-

real and yet real as the grey mists that were for ever rising from the marshy land and circling in their thin, gossamer-like fashion about the few elms and starved orchards. It was out of the world: its parish church stood three miles away in one direction; the nearest railway station five miles off in another; the market-town was farther off still. True, it had one special means of communicating with outside things, for a canal ran through it, and it had a small wharf wherefrom such produce as wheat, barley, oats, and potatoes were shipped, and to which coal, artificial manure, and feeding-stuffs were brought—this wharf, next to the Boatman Inn, was the chief gathering-place of the village, and in summer was more in favour than the inn itself, for then the men could sit or lounge about it on the look-out for the coming or passing of some slow-moving barge which had set out days before from some place where there were many people, and had accordingly brought some atmosphere of activity with it.

Yewford Grange was a grey and gaunt house enclosed in a high wall—so high that the tallest man could not look over it. Once within the wall, many things came to sight. The house was old and suggestive of mediævalism; there had been a deep moat round it at one time, supplied from the river which had long since given place to the canal, and the drawbridge by which it had been crossed still existed before the front entrance. There were mullioned windows and high gables above, and much ivy clus-

tering on the walls; a slight touch of something hard to define, a skilful laying out of the garden, now and always given up to the growing of potatoes and cabbages, a love of the old and picturesque, would have made the old Tudor mansion a joy and a delight to appreciative hearts. As it stood, presenting itself to the sight in the midst of its utilitarian surroundings of fold and stackyards, it looked bare and desolate, as if something had robbed it of its soul. Once upon a time gay cavaliers had gone in and out through the great doorway with jest and laughter, with clank of steel and jingle of spurs, and fair ladies had tripped lightly along the garden walks between the standard roses; now only the shadows of Simon Linacre and such as he gathered about him came between the threshold and the sunlight.

The inside of the house was as soulless as the outside. There was a great stone hall which might have been made a haunt of charm; there were great rooms and chambers, vaulted and panelled, which had once rung with laughter and merry voices and were now silent as the grave. Nothing of youth or lightness of heart could live in such a place; nothing young, in fact, did live in it. Mr. Linacre's establishment there was small. His family consisted of an ancient aunt, who was spending the last days of her existence in an elbow-chair by the fire; a housekeeper who would have made an admirable model for the Witch of Endor as she is commonly supposed to have presented herself to Solomon; and an ill-favoured and

morose serving-man, who, like the housekeeper, was a fixture, and passed his time in feeding the pigs and fowls, milking the cows, attending to the garden, and quarrelling with the farm-labourers, who dwelt outside the great enclosing wall, and were glad to have it behind them when the day's work was over. For here, Mr. Linacre was a stern, exacting task-master; by virtue of his position as the principal farmer in the district he ruled the labour market with a rod of iron, and just as he consigned most of his hearers to eternal damnation when he thundered at them from the pulpit of the little meeting-house on those Sundays on which he was appointed to preach, so he condemned the general run of things in Yewford to much labour and as little pay as would keep body and soul together.

Living an eremite-like existence, Mr. Linacre rarely entertained company at the Grange. Now and then, when one of the circuit ministers came to preach in the village, the odd-job man killed a couple of chickens or of ducks, and the vinegar-faced housekeeper made a modest feast. Sometimes a drover or a seed-merchant was invited within to complete a bargain, give or receive a cheque, and drink a glass of spirits. But as a rule the Grange was left to its four tenants. There was little doing in it. The old aunt sat by the kitchen fire all day, babbling incessantly of bygone days; the housekeeper had finished all her work by noon, and for the rest of the day knitted endless stockings of grey wool; the old man,

when he had finished his labours, sat dull and lowering on the long-settle, apparently resentful of all the world. Linacre kept to himself, rarely throwing a word to any of them. There was one room in which his meals, simple enough, were served; this also proved the scene of such entertainments as he ever gave to the ministers or occasional visitors. There was another in which he spent his evenings—no one was ever allowed to enter that room on any pretext whatever; it would, indeed, have been impossible for them to do so, for Linacre always kept it locked and never permitted the housekeeper to go into it, even to make the fire, except in his presence. Here he kept his books and papers; here he considered and perfected his various schemes; here at night he sat and drank alone, for he was one of those heavy and steady drinkers upon whom liquor seems to have no effect; certainly he was never suspected by the people who held him in high odour of sanctity and regarded him as a pillar of the church. In this retreat, a small, oak-panelled room cut in a quiet angle of the old house, Linacre sat drinking and thinking on the night on which Mia was declaring her intentions to her little circle. He had a cigar in the corner of his mouth, a tumbler of toddy stood near his easy chair, there were lemons and sugar on the table, and a kettle singing on the hob. And on his knee lay some papers at which Mr. Linacre, who had been seized with a brilliant idea before leaving his confidential friend, servant, and tool at Clothford that

morning, glanced from time to time with evident satisfaction.

"It will be a good thing to do," mused Mr. Linacre, watching the dancing flames on his lonely hearth. "It's time I had a little advertisement—it's three years since I gave that hundred pounds to provide Bibles and hymn-books for every pulpit in the circuit, each volume bearing a suitable inscription in gold letters to that effect. There's no necessity to proclaim what I intend doing from the house tops—men like Belford will talk and he'll have it noised abroad through the circuit before long. If he doesn't, I will. And after all, I lose nothing, even in cash. On the contrary. It'll be a cheap advertisement, and stand me well with the connection—and with popular opinion."

Mr. Linacre took a hearty pull at his glass and continued to muse.

"Popular opinion, now?—that's a thing that needs cultivation. If you want to do anybody—as everybody does—the first thing to be achieved is to establish confidence. Never attempt to get credit at first—the true method is to pay cash on the nail until your credit's established. Then's the time to operate—the time when everybody believe in you. It's the people who believe in you who ought to be done—they deserve it. So first of all make 'em believe in you—in other words establish your credit. The more credit you've got the more you'll have to abuse."

Having reflected upon this last proposition for a

few minutes Mr. Linacre put the papers in his pocket, mixed himself a fresh supply of toddy, and lighting another cigar, relapsed into further meditations of a comfortable nature.

"Religion," mused Mr. Linacre, "is the most valuable asset in building up a successful career in business. Religion and plenty of it, laid on thick, and on both sides, goes down well with fools. And most folks are fools. Nearly all of us are fools. But not Simon Linacre—oh, dear me, no! S. L. has a sharp eye for himself. That's his Christian duty—there's Scriptural warrant for that. Aren't we told that if a man does well to himself all men will speak well of him? Just so. That's sound common sense. And there are all sorts of ways of doing well to one's self. A common mind, like Mortimer's, now, demurs at deliberately sacrificing a beggarly two hundred pound—a mind like S. L.'s says it's a cheap price to pay for a good advertisement, especially when the quarterly meeting's coming round, and S. L. wants to be re-elected as steward again. Mortimer's useful, but he's not a genius. He'd never have thought of a good idea like this. I shan't regret a couple of hundred—besides, I've lost nothing. And it'll be as well to stand high at Scarthington."

With these various ideas in his mind Mr. Linacre got into his dog-cart next morning and drove across country to call on James Belford, whom he chanced to find just outside his farmstead and who showed some surprise at sight of him.

"Peace be upon you and yours, brother," said Mr. Linacre, with quite unobtrusive piety. "You'll be surprised to see me, but there's a little matter that I wanted to talk to you about. We'll put the mare up, brother, if you can find her a stall—it's cold for her to stand about, this weather."

"Why, I've plenty of stalls, Mestur Linacre," said Belford, with a doubtful smile. "Our trouble is to find ought to put in 'em. I'll take the mare out wi' pleasure, sir—happen you'll step into the house while I put her up?"

"Nay, brother, I will assist you," answered Linacre, dismounting from the dog-cart and leading his mare within Belford's fold. "Not that I misdoubt your ability, brother, but it is laid upon us, being merciful men, to be merciful to our beasts, which I take it means that we should do what we can for them with our own hands."

"Well, now, I shouldn't wonder if that is the meaning, sir," said Belford, leading the way to his stable, "though it never struck me o' that way before. You see we've no great accommodation, Mestur Linacre," he continued, throwing open a door, when they had released the mare from the dog-cart, "it's cold and bare-looking, but I've no doubt your animal'll manage here, sir, and I'll give her a salverful of oats."

Linacre, whose only concern for his mare arose from the fact that she cost him eighty guineas,

waited until he saw that she was safely housed and covered over with a rug, and then accompanied Belford into the house and to the parlour, where there was no fire, but which was, said the farmer, the only room in the place where there was any privacy.

"And as it's a bit coldish in here, sir," said Belford, "happen you'll take a drop of spirits to warm you? It's a matter that I don't often use myself, but I have a bottle or two of whisky that Colonel Daubeney sent me down that time his friends shot over my land—he always remembers one in that way, and with a brace of birds or so, does the old Colonel. What do you say, Mestur Linacre?"

"Why, thank you, brother," said Linacre. "As you say, the morning is cold, and as the spirits are made and distilled from the kindly fruits of the earth which are provided so that in due time we may enjoy them, why, I think, brother, we might use them—in moderation, of course."

Belford, to whose simple nature it was an exciting joy to be able to show hospitality of any description to as great a man as Mr. Linacre, made haste to produce a bottle of the Colonel's old whisky, at the sight of which Linacre, knowing from whose cellar it had come, felt a great gladness of heart which he concealed by assuming an unusually serious expression of countenance. He uttered a pious sentiment as he tasted the whisky, and took a seat opposite his host.

"And so, brother," he said, looking fixedly and with a certain air of mystery at Belford, "and so you were able to tide yourself over your little time of trouble, eh?"

Belford looked surprised.

"I was in Clothford yesterday, brother," continued Linacre. "Yes, I went to Mr. Mortimer to see what I could do for you—I had had no opportunity sooner. You must not have hard thoughts of Mr. Mortimer, Brother Belford, he is but a servant, an agent."

"That's what he's always told me, Mestur Linacre," said the farmer. "Yes, sir, I understand that he only represents others. Yes, sir, I did contrive to send Mestur Mortimer the interest, sir—a friend came forward and——"

Linacre lifted his head.

"Ah, brother, you should have waited a little to see what I could accomplish!" he said with a mildly reproachful air. "But no, I remember now—the time pressed, to be sure. Well, brother, I have been considering this case of yours—I feel moved to help you in it, brother."

"I'm sure it's uncommon kind of you to say so, Mestur Linacre," said Belford, who was greatly surprised. "If I'd had any idea, sir, that you were going to see Mestur Mortimer——"

"My fault, brother, my fault for not telling you," interrupted Linacre in the tones of one who manfully does penance. "Yes, as I say, I am moved—there's

a good many things moves in a mysterious way, brother—moved to stretch out the helping hand. For the Lord's sake, brother, of course."

"I'm sure, sir, there's no words——" began Belford.

"I have neither wife nor child, brother," said Linacre, interrupting him, "nor do I propose to have, and I have gathered in a little substance that I can spare for them that deserve it, such as yourself. And in short, brother"—here he produced the papers from his pocket—"I have paid Mr. Mortimer all that you owe him, and there are your documents—you can burn them now, brother Belford, and you are free of any claim that Mr. Mortimer had on you. Praise the Lord, brother!"

Belford, who still retained a clear recollection of what Old Wellington said to him the night before, was so much astonished by Mr. Linacre's announcement, and by the receipt of the papers, a cursory examination of which showed him that he was indeed free of the money-lender, that he was rendered incapable of speech, and could only rise and wring his benefactor's hand with great show of emotion.

"Drink of the spirits, brother," counselled Mr. Linacre. "They will restore your equilibrium which it is natural should totter on its throne at such a moment. Don't trouble to thank me, brother—I do but lend to the Lord, and I shall sleep a deal better in my bed than I have done of late, now that I know you are out of your troubles. So no thanks, brother."

"Eh, but I do thank you, sir!" exclaimed Belford. "And more nor you can understand, Mestur Linacre, if you'll excuse me for sayin' so. And if I never can, sir, the Lord'll reward you—He will!"

"No more, no more, brother!" said Mr. Linacre, gently but firmly. "Now, there's another little matter. That friend who lent you the interest money, brother—you'll perhaps tell me who that was?"

"Why, sir, it were my neighbour up the hill yonder," answered Belford, pointing through the window. "Thomas Green, the market-gardener. He's a member of society, sir—a very good-living man."

"Ah, to be sure; Brother Green," said Linacre reflectively. "Yes, I know him. Not a man of great substance, I think, brother?"

"I think he's saved a tidy bit, sir, has Thomas," replied Belford. "He's always been a man to save, and he's had no great expense."

"But not a man to lend money, brother," said Linacre. "No, brother, it would be better for you to repay Brother Green. Let me be the means, brother, of your so doing."

He drew some bank-notes from his pocket and handed them to Belford, who received them with added astonishment, and endeavoured to express further gratitude, only to be checked by his benefactor.

"Repay Thomas, brother," he said. "We are commanded to owe no man anything, you know. Repay our brother."

"I shall still owe you this money, sir," said Belford. "And——"

"No, brother!" said Linacre firmly. "You will not. You shall give me a receipt saying that you have received the sum, but not from me, brother Belford, not from me. I shall never ask you for it, brother—nobody will ever ask you for it. But you shall give a receipt for it, brother, if you will find ink and paper."

Belford, who was so bewildered by the events of the morning that he scarcely knew whether he was awake or dreaming, was some time in discovering writing materials, and Mr. Linacre amused himself during his absence from the room by helping himself generously to the Colonel's fine old whisky and by looking out of the window. And as he gazed across the street, Mia came to the door of the Lamberts' cottage, and stood there with the autumn sunlight glittering on her shining hair.

"What shall I write, Mestur Linacre?" asked Belford, when he returned with pen and ink. "Perhaps you'll kindly tell me what to put, sir—you know I'm no great scholar."

"Ah, let us consider, brother," replied Linacre, turning from the window. "Well, now, supposing we give thanks where it is due, brother Belford? You shall write this, 'Received from the Lord through Brother Simon Linacre the sum of—let's see, now—yes, that's it—one hundred and ninety

pounds to discharge me of debt!' How will that do, brother?"

"It's a kind way of you to put it, sir," answered Belford, laboriously writing out the receipt. "I hope the bread you've cast upon the waters, Mestur Linacre, will return to you four-fold, yes, and twenty-fold. There's nobody could be gratefuller to you, sir, than I am—I wish I could do aught to show it!"

"Well, well, brother," said Linacre, taking the paper and placing it in his pocket-book, "you can reward me in remembering me when you hear men speak evil of me. I have my enemies, brother Belford, yes, even among the congregation of the faithful!"

"You don't mean it, Mestur Linacre!" exclaimed Belford, who was genuinely shocked. "Nay, I can't think that, sir."

"It is the truth, brother, nevertheless," said Linacre, sighing. "Them that sit in high places cannot avoid the arrows of the envious. I have been one of the circuit stewards for many years, brother Belford—a many years before you came into these parts."

"And'll continue to hold that position, I hope, sir," said Belford.

Linacre sighed again and shook his head.

"I don't know, brother, I don't know!" he said. "There are those that are against me. It will be the quarterly meeting soon, when that question is to be decided. Now, you, brother, as a respected member

of society and a local preacher, will have some weight with the brethren. I shall hope, brother, that your word will be for me, unworthy as I am. I have toiled hard in the discharge of my duties, brother, as the Lord knows."

"Aught that I can say or do, sir, will be said and done," answered Belford. "I'm not one of them that's behind hand in giving praise where it's due, Mestur Linacre, and I daresay I have a bit of influence on this side of the circuit. I shall speak to all that I meet, sir, and I shall let it be known what a Christian-like deed you've done unto me—I shall!"

Mr. Linacre modestly answered that he did not wish a neighbourly deed to be made anything of, and that brother Belford must act according to his conscience, after which, pulling out his watch, he remarked that it was now noon and time for his departure, but that he first wished to pay a visit to the bereaved family across the road, and would be glad if Mr. Belford would accompany him.

"I understand that the young maiden desires to enter service and preferably in a town family," he said, as they left the farm and approached the cottage, "and I happened to hear yesterday, brother, of a place that would suit her—in fact, with Mr. Mortimer's housekeeper, in Clothford, a worthy woman who would be as a mother to her."

"And very much obliged they'll be to you, I'm sure, Mestur Linacre," said Belford. "It's a deal better when a young maid does go to service in a

town that it should be to somewhere and someone that's known, sir. Towns is perilous places, Mestur Linacre."

"The wolves are everywhere, brother," said Linacre in his most profound manner. "It behoves us who shepherd the flock to exercise care, brother, great care."

The Lamberts were at dinner when they entered the cottage—Michael, now promoted to his father's place at the head of the table, was helping his sisters to a rabbit pie on which Keziah was taking especial pride to herself; he looked up in astonishment at Mr. Linacre, recognizing him as the oddly habited farmer whom he had previously seen at sheep-fairs and auctions; Keziah, hastily mentioning the visitor's name, made haste to get him a chair.

"Sister," said Linacre, in his best visiting manner, "no ceremony, I beg—I shall not intrude more than a few minutes. I trust I see you all well, and that your mother is as well as can be hoped for in her afflicted state?"

"Happen you'll sit down and take a bit of dinner, sir?" said Michael hospitably. "And you and all, Mestur Belford—it's a fine big pie, this—there's four young rabbits in it, and our Keziah's a rare hand at makin' rabbit pies. I'm sure you'd be kindly welcome."

"Yes, I'm sure!" said Keziah, who was never behind hand in matters of hospitality. "And it's just hot out o' th' oven, too."

But Mr. Linacre waved a polite though apparently regretful refusal, and Belford explained that he had already pressed the visitor to share his dinner, but that he was anxious to drive farther on and he must be off, and that he himself was expected home.

"Our missis 'ud never be able to manage wi'out me!" he said, with a knowing look at Keziah. "We've so many mouths to fill round our table. Nay, Mestur Linacre come over to inform you of something that he thought would suit Mia there—he's a good one for remembering his friends, is Mestur Linacre."

"I have heard," said Linacre, "of a situation that would doubtless be pleasant to the maiden if she and you, sister Lambert, and you, young man, think fit. It is in the house of a friend of mine in Clothford, a quiet gentleman named Mortimer, whom brother Belford here knows and can speak of."

"He's a very nice-mannered gentleman, is Mestur Mortimer," said Belford, who was in such a state of joy at his relief from monetary embarrassments that he had forgotten everything unpleasant. "A very nice gentleman to deal with, and well-spoken and quiet."

"It is a quiet house and the duties are light," said Linacre. "The housekeeper, Mrs. Weare, is an estimable woman. I should advise, sister Lambert, that you and your sister go over there and see Mrs. Weare and the house, which is in the best part of the town."

"Well, I'm sure it's very kind of you, sir," said Keziah. "Of course, if Mia will go into a town, it's better to know where she is going."

"Aye, a deal better," said Michael. "We're much obliged to you, sir. What do you say, Mia?"

Mia, who for some reason had turned remarkably shy, said that she should certainly like to live in Clothford, and it was thereupon settled that she and Keziah should go there on the next market day, when there would be cheap tickets, and make their own arrangements. Mr. Linacre thereupon gave them Mr. Mortimer's address, and having bestowed his benediction upon them, departed with Belford, and was persuaded, the morning being cold, to have another glass of Colonel Daubeney's whisky before driving away. He went off at last almost persuaded that he was really all that Belford believed him to be.

VII

TO KEZIAH a journey as far afield as Clothford—which, to be sure, was only a matter of five-and-thirty miles away—was as great and momentous an event as a modern child's first visit to London is to the child. Year in and year out she never went from home; as a rule her longest excursion from the cottage was on Sunday afternoon when she went round the corner to the little chapel. Now and then, but at long intervals, she had attended such festive occasions as tea-meetings and anniversary services in neighbouring villages, but her invariable conclusion about these things was that it was more of a toil than a pleasure to go to them, and as she had grown older she had clung closer to home, where indeed there was abundant scope for her energies. There was no need for her to go to the market-town of a Saturday—most of the women did so, but it was only to gossip and to drink; whatever Keziah required from it she could get brought out by the grocer's cart. Mia sometimes walked in there with her friend Hetty Green, and Michael occasionally made a Saturday evening excursion that way, but towns, big or little, were not to Keziah's taste, and the less she saw of them, she was wont to say, the better they and she agreed.

It was accordingly with feelings of discomfort and trepidation that she contemplated the journey to so big a place as Clothford. Keziah was by nature a model of precision and regularity; she had her appointed days and seasons; her life was as a well-oiled machine, and it was discomposing to have the placid routine broken in upon, the easy swing of the pendulum interrupted. There were so many things to think of, she declared, that she earnestly trusted no such occasion would ever arise again. There was provision for her mother's due care and safety to be made; the muffin-maker would certainly keep faith and attend to her well, but supposing the muffin-maker's man happened an accident, or one of her children got on fire, what then? Then there was the fact that the visit to Clothford would throw the whole week out of gear; some one of the weekly tasks would have to be abandoned, or the work of two days pressed into one. And there would be the trouble of dressing up, and then of walking three miles to catch a train, and altogether it was an infliction that ought not to have been visited upon any Christian soul.

"An' if you'd only been content to ha' ta'en that good place lyin' open for you at the Hall, Mia Lambert," said Keziah on the night before this momentous journey, "all this wouldn't ha' happened, and I should ha' got my proper work done to-morrow i'stead o' trapesin' about a musty, mucky hole like yon Clothford—I remember what it were like last

time I set foot in it and that's ten years or more since—naught but rain all day—they say it never does naught but rain there, and I can well believe it."

"It never rained once all the week I was there," retorted Mia.

"An' when you do get there," continued Keziah, whose eloquence once let loose regarded nothing but its own flow, "when you do get there I'm sure it's naught but thieves and robbers on every side on you—twopence here and twopence there 'at all your brass is gone before you know where you are. I'm sure me an' Mary Ellen Trippett were tret shameful—we went into a place and axed for a cup o' tea—and nowt but coloured water it were when we got it!—and a bit o' bread and butter, and they charged us sixpence apiece. 'Nay,' I says, 'I know now what it means in t' Good Book when they talk about fallin' among thieves'—I could made a good cup o' tea for both on us for a penny. But I shall take summat to eat in my satchel to-morrow, Mia Lambert—I'm none goin' to be robbed by no Clothforders—and happen this lady 'at we've to call on'll give us a cup o' tea—I'm sure she ought to do so, seein' 'at we've travilled so far."

"Why, Mr. Linacre gave you a sovereign to pay expenses!" exclaimed Mia, who had witnessed this transaction, and had caught a glance which Linacre intended specially for herself. "And the tickets are cheaper on market days. You'll have enough to pay

for a good dinner, Keziah—I know where there’s a nice place, and you can have a better cup of tea there than you ever tasted in your life.”

“Oh, can I, my fine miss!” said Keziah, who had already locked up Linacre’s sovereign in a safe and secret receptacle and had provided herself with just sufficient silver to cover bare expenses. “I’ve no doubt, but you’re none goin’ to see me wastin’ good brass on vanity and softness. An’ if Mestur Linacre did give me a sovereign, Mia Lambert, who’s goin’ to fit you out an’ find you your things before you go to place, if you do go—you tell me that there! You’re none goin’ to get me into none o’ your grand places to eat and drink money—there were one place ’at me and Mary Ellen Trippett looked at where they actually had th’ impidence to want eighteen-pence for a dinner!—and as for tea, I can make a better cup o’ tea nor anybody you know, so there!”

With the object of getting back as soon as possible from the detested atmosphere of the town, Keziah, who tore herself away at last with a firm conviction that she would return to find the cottage burnt down, her mother dead, and everything gone to wrack and ruin, insisted on setting out immediately after an early breakfast, and by half-past eight she and Mia were walking through Up-Town on their way to the road-side station three miles off. And as they passed Mr. Hopkinson’s farmstead out from the gates came Reuben Gaunt, driving the farmer’s light spring cart, in the back of which a small calf, shortly to be

converted into veal, was uttering a plaintive protest against the situation in which it found itself.

Reuben had seen neither Keziah nor Mia since the night which had seemed to witness the shattering of his immediate hopes, and he flushed hotly at the sight of them. But seeing they were attired in their best, and presumably bound for the market-town or somewhere in that direction, Reuben on coming alongside them pulled up and addressed Keziah.

"If so be as you're going into town or i' that direction," he said, "ye may just as well ride—this cart'll carry three in front, comfortable."

"No, no, Keziah!" whispered the younger sister. "Don't—I'd rather walk."

But Keziah hesitated—she was speculating on the chance of getting any loose hair from the calf on her best black gown.

"Well, an' I don't know that I should, Mia Lambert," she said. "Happen if Reuben gives us a lift we can get an earlier train, and i' that case we shall come back earlier. But where are you going, Reuben—we'm for Elmhouse station."

"I'm going past there," answered Reuben. He edged farther along the seat, and Keziah climbed up and sat next to him. Mia, who had so far avoided Reuben's eyes, followed her, and they set off along the wind-swept road, the calf's laments trailing behind them as they quitted the village.

Reuben, who felt that something much more substantial than Keziah's spare anatomy interposed be-

tween him and Mia, was gloomy and taciturn and at the same time anxious to be polite. After half-a-mile of silence he summoned sufficient courage to speak.

"It's a coldish mornin'," he observed.

"I care nowt how cold it is," replied Keziah, "nor how blowy it is, so long as it doesn't rain. But they say it always does rain i' Clothford, an' wi'out ceasing, so it's no use expectin' no different."

So they were going to Clothford! Reuben felt himself growing hot, then cold, then hot again. He strove hard to retain his equanimity.

"It'll none rain to-day," he said, gazing at the sky around them. "At least not in this neighbourhood. An' I never heard tell of a place where it were always rainin'—come now, Keziah!"

He laughed as he said this, and Mia did not notice that the laugh was forced and harsh. She took it as a sign that Reuben was not unfriendly.

"Nor nobody else!" she said. "Keziah thinks it's always raining at Clothford because it happened to rain when she was there."

"Aw, of course," said Reuben, thrilled by Mia's voice, "it'll be fine sometimes at Clothford same as elsewhere. Wet one day and dry another, I expect—all places is alike—ye have to take t' weather as it comes."

Then there was little more talk between them until they drove up to the station and the two women dismounted. Reuben leant over the splashboard.

"If so be as you know what train you were com-

in' back by i' th' afternoon," he said, "happen I could ha' given you another lift, 'cause I'm takin' this here calf to our master' brother' place over Pitbury way, and it's that far that I shall put t' horse up when I get there and stop to my dinner. You don't know, very like, what train you'd be comin' back wi'—if you did I could be here."

Mia was for declining this offer; she was not without hopes of persuading Keziah to spend the afternoon in looking into the shop-windows at Clothford. But Keziah saw the practical advantage of Reuben's offer, and turned to a porter who had come out of the station as a slight relief to the deadly monotony of his existence, to find out what time they could return. And ascertaining that they could be back at Elmhouse at three o'clock they left Reuben with the understanding that he was to meet them there at that time, Mia favouring him, as he drove away in front of his calf, with a glance that was half defiant and half mischievous.

Although it was a fine, invigorating morning when the sisters emerged upon the life and bustle of Clothford, Keziah was not to be tempted to waste time by looking into shop-windows or gazing at the scenes in the streets. Her one idea was to find out the nearest way to their destination, to get there, do their business, and get away again. It was in vain that Mia pointed out that in that case they would very likely have to spend a couple of hours in the station, doing nothing, until their train time came; in vain

that a friendly policeman informed them that they could get a tram at the corner which would take them up to the district they wanted for twopence—Keziah was not to be moved out of the programme she had laid down for herself. Having ascertained the direction in which she desired to proceed she set off thither at a business-like speed.

"Trams, indeed!" she said with great scorn. "And I wonder what folk like us wants wi' such things. Two twopences is fourpence; and two fourpences is eightpence—I could make a dinner out o' that for a whole family! But these here townsfolk does naught but throw their brass away as soon as they handle it. And whatever you want to come and live in a place like this here for, Mia Lambert, fair caps me!—what wi' these great buildin's, and th' smoke, and them trams a-rampagin' up and down t' street, and t' folks runnin' agen you and rammin' their elbows into you wi'out so much as a 'By your leave' or 'Beg your pardon'—nay! I'd rather live i' some o' them foreigneerin' countries 'at the missionaries talks about, even if they be savages and cannibals!"

"There is something to see here, at any rate," said Mia, gazing regretfully at the shops by which Keziah hurried without so much as a glance. "And there's nothing to see at home, Keziah."

"Oh, isn't there, miss?" exclaimed Keziah. "I'd rather look out of our window and see Mestur Belford' farm-house nor all t' shops i' Clothford, or

i' London either, so there! And don't you go to think, Mia Lambert, that you'll have naught else to do but tramp about staring into shop-windows and such-like when you get here, supposin' you do come. Young gels as goes out to service in towns in general has a good deal more to do nor what they would have if they'd stayed in the country—as you might ha' done," she concluded significantly.

Mia made no reply. She had her own ideas about coming to Clothford: her one great desire was to get away from the dullness of village life. If she found the atmosphere of Mr. Mortimer's household too quiet for her or not to her taste it would be an easy thing, she told herself, to leave it for something more congenial. But Mia had a notion that she might find a friend in Mr. Linacre, to whose professional piety she attached little importance; the fact that he was able to give sovereigns away as other people gave half-pennies appealed much more to her imagination than anything else about him; besides he had given her a smile which suggested a good deal that Keziah would never have understood.

"Well, it's a quiet enough neighbourhood, is this," remarked the elder sister, when they turned into the street wherein Mr. Mortimer resided, "and very good-looking houses an' all. Is my bonnet straight, Mia? and mind you're very polite and quiet in your manner, and——"

"I wish you'd leave me be!" retorted Mia. "I

know how to behave myself as well as you, and, Keziah, I'd rather have come by myself if you're going on like that—I'm not a baby!"

Keziah would have had something incisive to say on this point but for the fact that they had already rung the bell, and that before she could speak the door had opened and Rachel Weare stood confronting them.

The housekeeper took in Mia's beauty with one quick glance. She scarcely seemed to hear or to heed Keziah as the latter gave voluble explanations as to their presence, but bidding them enter led them to a breakfast room within the inner hall and bidding them be seated sat down herself with her face in the shade and once more looked long and earnestly at the girl before her.

"Mr. Mortimer left instructions that I was to engage you on Mr. Linacre's recommendation if the terms were agreeable to you," she said, speaking in a dull, colourless voice and as if repeating a lesson previously committed word by word to memory. "The wages are fifteen pounds a year, and there is very little to do, because a woman comes every morning to do the rough work, and I do all the cooking myself. Can you cook?" she went on with more animation. "If not, I would teach you to cook—I am supposed to excel in that."

"An' I'm sure my sister would be glad to learn, and to learn aught else that you could teach her, ma'am," said Keziah, before Mia could reply. "Of

course, she's never been out to service before, and though she had a good place as under parlour-maid offered at the Hall, where our Squire and his good lady lives, she's all for coming into a town, and Mr. Linacre having spoken very high of this place, of course we're agreeable that she should come where we're known as it were."

But the housekeeper seemed to have no great concern with what Keziah said; she watched Mia constantly with an expression which the girl could not understand.

"I should be glad to teach you cooking," she said again, half-dreamily. "I take great pride in my cooking. Mr. Linacre always praises it when he comes here—he visits Mr. Mortimer frequently."

"I shall be glad to learn, ma'am," said Mia. She hesitated a moment and then said, half-timidly, half-indistinctly, "I suppose I should have some time of my own to go out?"

The housekeeper seemed as if she scarcely understood this question, but she suddenly woke to a comprehension of it.

"Oh! Oh, yes, of course," she answered. "Yes—I never go out much myself. Yes, in an afternoon there's nothing doing—you could always go out then."

"Well, not every afternoon, I should hope, ma'am," said Keziah sharply. "I don't hold with young gels havin' so much freedom as all that, and if my sister had a Sunday afternoon to attend the chap-

pil, and happen an hour or so for a walk during the week, it would be——”

Mia, however, had risen and was looking at the housekeeper.

“I’ll take the place, thank you,” she said quietly. “When shall I come, ma’am?”

Rachel, who in making any answer, seemed to have to recall some lesson that had been taught her, thought for a moment.

“Oh, when you can be ready,” she answered. “Perhaps in a week if——”

“I’ll come a week to-day, ma’am,” said Mia.

Rachel’s hand moved to a corner of the mantel-piece. She produced a sovereign and held it out to Mia.

“Mr. Mortimer said I was to give you this,” she said mechanically. “He said he believed it was the custom in your part of the country to give a fastening-penny.”

Mia took the coin with a murmur of thanks; Keziah looked on with a feeling of helplessness.

“Perhaps you’d like to look over the house?” said Rachel. She led them from one room to another, upstairs and downstairs, with little comment. In a few minutes they were in the street again.

“Well, I must say, Mia Lambert, ’at you take a great deal on yourself,” said Keziah indignantly. “I might ha’ been a carved image for all the notice that was taken of me! I’d no say in the matter at all.”

“I don’t know what there was for you to say,

Keziah," said the younger sister. "And I never asked you to come—I told you I could manage things for myself. Let's go and look at the shops and I'll treat you to your dinner out of my pound."

"An' certain sure I am that I shall do no such thing, Mia Lambert!" exclaimed Keziah. "The idea of usin' brass like that there! I've gotten some currant cake and an apple pasty i' my satchil, and you mun eat some o' them, and then happen we can find a cheap place to get a cup of tea at, and if we can't, we shall none have so long to bide before we get home, especially as Reuben Gaunt's goin' to give us a lift."

"Well, I don't want any currant cake nor apple pasty," said Mia. "I'm going to look at the shops and then I'm going to have my dinner at the restaurant, and if you'd have come, too, I'd have paid for yours. But as you won't, Keziah, I'll meet you at the station."

With that, and before the scandalized and affronted Keziah could say a word, Mia, who was already well acquainted with Clothford, sped away down the first turning and made for the chief streets of the city, laughing with sheer delight at finding herself free. She was, in fact, only carrying out a previously conceived plan, but she was in a better position to carry it through more agreeably to herself because of the unexpected sovereign. All unknown to Keziah she had brought with her the sovereign which Linacre had given her the day after her father's

death—she was therefore in possession of two golden pounds when she went dancing away from her strict and careful sister.

It was then only half-past eleven—Mia had two hours and a half of glorious life before her. She went up one street and down another, feasting her eyes on the milliners, the dressmakers, the bonnet-makers, and on the fine ladies who at noon came forth to shop in the principal resort. At half-past twelve she was hungry, and repaired to a restaurant to which she had once been taken during her memorable visit—her dinner prompted her to go and buy herself a necklace which had taken her fancy, and a certain elemental generosity being present in her nature she spent a good part of her fastening-penny in buying a warm shawl for her mother, a brooch for Keziah, and a neckerchief of many colours for Michael. And something suddenly prompted her to add to these purchases a fine necktie for Reuben Gaunt.

VIII

LEFT to herself in the midst of the much-disliked city, Keziah first of all swallowed her indignation, and then made the best of her way back towards the railway terminus. By the time she arrived there she was both hungry and thirsty, for she had broken her fast at an unusually early hour, even for her. She accordingly went into the third-class waiting room, and opening her satchel produced her despised currant cake and apple pasty, and made a hearty lunch, after which she set out in search of a cup of tea. By mistake she wandered into the first-class buffet, and was highly incensed to find that she had to pay sixpence for a small pot of what she called school-feast tea. It was neither strong nor black and had no flavour, and if the barmaid who supplied her with it could have been withered at a glance she would have died there and then. Keziah, therefore, was in no good humour when Mia returned to the station and found her sitting solitary and disconsolate in the uncomfortable waiting room.

“And I would like to know where you been all this time, Mia Lambert,” she said, viewing the girl and her parcels with severe displeasure. “If this is the way you’re going on I’m sure I don’t know what’s

going to become of you. And I expect you've been spending brass on fal-lals and fripperies and such-like, and me grudgin' sixpence for a cup o' tea, for which I were fair dyin'."

"Well, you should have come with me and had a good dinner, Keziah," said Mia. "You couldn't guess what I had—roast goose and stuffing, and cherry tart and cream, and I'd a glass of real port wine, too—you don't know what you missed, Keziah."

"Don't know what I missed!" snapped Keziah. "No, but I know what you'll miss sooner or later, my fine young madam—you won't have a decent smock to your back if you go on spending your brass i' that fond way! The idea o' you goin' and takin' your dinner wi' wine as if you were a lady!—I don't know where you get such high notions from. And pray how much did that cost, miss?"

"Oh, I don't know—three and sixpence, I think," answered Mia carelessly. "Here, have a chocolate."

She handed a paper of sweets in her sister's direction, but Keziah in spite of having a sweet tooth, maintained a firmly negative attitude.

"I shall do naught o' th' sort, Mia Lambert!" she said indignantly. "I will not countenance you in flinging brass away like that there. Three shillin' and sixpence indeed for a dinner—I wonder your poor father doesn't turn over in his grave to hear of such things!"

"Well, he may have done for aught you know," retorted Mia, "but if he did he wouldn't make as much fuss as you do. He wasn't one for spoiling a bit of fun."

"Fun!" groaned Keziah. "The Lord preserve all on us! And I reckon you've been spending more brass," she went on, glancing suspiciously at the parcels. "We've always been a saving family, us Lamberts, but it seems to me that money burns your pocket, my lass, judging by the way you spend it."

"Well, I haven't spent it on myself, any way," said Mia. "There's a shawl for my mother's shoulders, and a handkerchief for Michael, and as Reuben Gaunt gave us a ride I bought him a necktie, and there's a brooch for you, Keziah, and there it is—you said the other day that you wanted one."

"Well, I expect bairns will be bairns," sighed Keziah, mollified by the present, which on being unwrapped proved to be a sepulchral design in Whitby jet and therefore highly gratifying to her feelings, "and it were kind on you to bear me i' mind, Mia, but if you go spending your brass i' that fashion, you'll have none left, and what'll you do then?"

"Find some more," answered Mia flippantly. "Come on, Keziah, it's time we went to the train."

Reuben Gaunt, having got rid of his calf, had put the back seat up at the rear of the spring cart, and he drew the attention of the sisters to that fact when they emerged from the station and found him waiting in the road.

"I thowt there'd be a bit more room, like," he said. "It's none so comfortable, after all, ridin' three abreast, and now 'at t' calf's gone there's room behind."

"Then I'll get up there," said Keziah. "I'd rather sit wi' my back to t' horse—Mia can ride i' front."

Mia, who was now in high spirits, accordingly climbed up by Reuben's side, and Keziah having settled herself on the back seat, they moved away at a pace which Reuben would gladly have made slower.

"I've brought you a fairing, Reuben," said Mia slyly. "Guess what it is."

Reuben grew warm and uncomfortable. He did not know how to take this new departure on the girl's part.

"I were never much of a hand at guessin', Mia," he said. "Happen a bit o' 'bacca like."

"No, it isn't," answered Mia.

"I can't think o' naught else," said Reuben after a pause.

"Why, there's lots of things besides tobacco!" exclaimed Mia.

"I daresay there is," replied Reuben, "but I can't rightly think on 'em at this present. Happen it's twopennorth o' spice."

"Happen it isn't then," said Mia. "You are a poor hand at guessing. Reuben, it's something to wear—now!"

Reuben pondered deeply. He tried to enumerate

all the various articles of attire which could fittingly be named, but he was dazed by Mia's contiguity, and his wits went wool-gathering. He glanced at Mia's parcels.

"Happen it's a comforter," he said. "Mrs. Hopkinson gave me a comforter last Christmas."

"Well, you're not far off it," said Mia. "It's a necktie, see!"

She unwrapped one of her parcels and drew forth a necktie in which several colours of a lively sort were intermingled; taking it altogether this article of apparel had a bright effect, but it was not so bright as Reuben's face suddenly became.

"Nay!" he exclaimed, as delighted and shy as a child at receiving some coveted prize. "Well, I'm deeply obliged, Mia. It's not oft 'at anybody ever gives me aught—I'll keep it for better occasions," he said, putting the necktie safely away in his breast pocket. "It'll go well with my Sunday coat. But you shouldn't ha' wared no brass on me, Mia, I'm sure."

"She'll have no brass to ware on anybody if she goes on as she's started, my lad," remarked Keziah from the back of the spring-cart. "She were none made to have brass, weren't our Mia—but for all that," she added, remembering the jet brooch, "for all that I will say that she wares it on other folk."

Mia was conscious of her necklace and of what she had given for it. One of her sovereigns was gone already, and there was a big hole in the other.

"It came out of my fastening-penny," she said. "It's not lucky if you don't spend your fastening-penny."

"Aye, but you needn't spend it all at once," said Keziah. "There's no need to do that. I'll lay Reuben doesn't spend his as soon as he gets it."

Reuben heard but made no answer. He was thinking of something else. "So you're engaged somewhere, Mia?" he said gently. "Somewhere in Clothford, I expect?"

"Yes, I'm going to Clothford," she answered.

"And I'm sure she's welcome," said Keziah, "and so is everybody else 'at's fond enough to go and live i' such a place where it's naught but muck and noise and steam-engines rortin' and puffin' about t' streets and you can't get a cup of tea for less nor sixpence and naught no better nor stronger nor what they give bairns at school treats. It'll be some time before I set foot in Clothford agen, so there!"

Reuben said no more. They were soon in Up-Town, and he waited while the two women alighted, and then drove into the Hopkinson farmstead and began to put his horse up. Mr. Hopkinson came along by the stable-door and looked in. Reuben accosted him—there was something of a new firmness and resolution in his manner.

"I wanted to speak to you, maister," he said. "I've considered matters, and I think I could like a change. I've never had a better place nor what yours is, but I would like a change."

The farmer looked at him in surprise, but saw that his mind was made up.

"All right, Reuben," he answered. "I'm sorry, but of course you know your own mind best. If you want to come back at any time——"

"Thank you, sir," said Reuben. "I shan't forget."

IX

THE gift of the multi-coloured necktie had the effect on Reuben Gaunt of re-raising his hopes and aspirations; he argued that if Mia could find time to think of him amidst all the distractions of the Clothford shops she must have some tender spot in her heart for him. He began to suspect that he had been too hasty in jumping to conclusions and had taken Mia too literally; it was not too late, however, to pursue another line of conduct, and he made up his mind that before Mia left the village he would come to a better understanding with her. With true rustic guile Reuben set about making his preparations towards this purpose; he said nothing to Michael and indeed kept out of his way, but he contrived to slip into the cottage when he knew both Michael and Mia were out and got Keziah to ask him to tea on the following Sunday, the last that Mia would spend at home. Keziah, old and crabbed maid that she was, had a soft spot in her heart for Reuben, and readily fell in with this plan; as she herself always spent the evening of Sunday with her mother, Reuben and Mia could have the place to themselves, she said, or he could walk her to church—aught that suited him best would suit her.

The early hours of that Sunday afternoon accordingly found Mr. Gaunt busily engaged in making his toilet. He had just partaken of a hearty dinner of boiled beef, potatoes, and carrots, topped up with a large dumpling swimming in treacle, and if he had not been in love he would have felt very happy. But, being in love, he was anxious, and his anxiety spread to the details and niceties of his attire. He had spent half the morning polishing his Sunday boots and brushing his Sunday clothes; the boots shone so brightly that he could see the reflection of his own face in them; the blue serge suit, which was nearly new and was kept from Sunday to Sunday wrapped up in accurate creases and in folds of soft paper, was innocent of a single speck of dust. Mr. Gaunt also possessed some fine linen shirts which he had invested in when he performed the duties of best man at a friend's wedding; he inveigled the maid at Mr. Hopkinson's to air him one of these at the kitchen fire. The maid, who was elderly and therefore privileged, spoke him her mind.

"Well, of all the fond pieces o' work 'at ever I knew!" said she. "The idee o' puttin' a linen shirt on when you've been weerin' flannin, Reuben Gaunt! You'll catch the brownkitis or summat o' that sort, and then you'll be laid up, and happen dee, and what then?"

"Why, that'll be t' end," said Reuben. "So there'll be no more shirts to air at t' fire."

"An' what might you be wantin' wi' a starched

shirt to-day for!" asked the maid. "There's naught goin' on, as I'm aware on, that calls for such grandeur. My father never had a starched shirt on him but once i' his life, and that were when his maister lent him one to be wed in."

"Aye, but they knew nowt about company manners i' them days," said Reuben. "Owt were good enough for them. But owt isn't good enough for me—I'm goin' to a tea-party."

"Well, if you go i' this here shirt you'll catch your death o' cold," affirmed the maid. "You've been wearin' flannin ever since harvest. You'd better have a piece of flannin' to put over your chest, under t' shirt—you can pin it on your singlet. I'll give you a piece out of an owd petticoat o' mine 'at I cut up t'other day."

But Reuben declined this aid to the prevention of cold and bronchitis—it seemed to him that Mia's necktie would be quite sufficient to keep him warm. It took a long time and much tying and retying to arrange it to his satisfaction, but he accomplished the difficult task at last, and being finally arrayed and carefully inspected in the looking-glass he sallied forth with a shining face and made his way to the Lamberts' cottage just in time for tea, which was always earlier on a Sunday because Keziah felt to need immediate refreshment after the stress of the afternoon service at the chapel.

Mia was making the tea and Keziah was taking off her bonnet when Reuben entered. The younger

sister seemed surprised at his coming, but Keziah, carrying out the plot, made haste to welcome him.

"You're just in time for a cup o' tea, Reuben," she said. "Mia, put another plate on the table, and toast another o' them muffins. Sit you down, Reuben—it's a coldish day, but seasonable."

"Why, thank you," said Reuben, bestowing himself in an easy chair. "I don't mind partakin' of an odd cup or so, though it's none so long since I had my dinner—we dine latish at Mestur Hopkinson's on Sundays—it's allus past one o'clock—and you tea early, appearently. I'll ho'd the toastin' fork for you, if you like, Mia."

Mia, who had just impaled a muffin on the toasting fork resigned the latter into Reuben's hands. She stood erect on the hearthrug, her hands planted on her hips, staring at him quizzically.

"My!" she exclaimed. "We are fine! How long did it take you to dress yourself, Reuben?"

Reuben grew very red.

"Not above ordinary," he answered. "There's naught fine about me, unless it's the necktie. I'm none used to finery."

"Well, you look very grand, anyhow," said Mia. "Doesn't he, Keziah?"

"Nay, I've no time to look at such things," exclaimed Keziah. "I want my tea, and I'm sure my mother'll be wantin' hers. Brother Nicholson were that powerful this afternoon i' preachin' about a lake 'at were full o' brimstone and such like 'at it's

made me fair drouthy—ye'll burn that muffin, Reuben, if ye ho'd it so near the bars."

It was very evident to Reuben that Mia had no sentimental feeling with regard to the fact that this was her last Sunday in the old home, from which she had never been away, except for short intervals, since her birth. When the tea-things had been duly cleared and Keziah, following her Sunday evening custom, had carried the family Bible, Wesley's hymns, and the week's tract upstairs to her mother's chamber, Reuben, who had been invited to smoke his pipe, gently alluded to the coming separation.

"You'll be feeling it a bit queer, like, Mia, leaving the old place and going to a new 'un, among strangers," he said in his half-timid way. "I know I felt that way, mysen, when I first went to place."

"Well, I don't feel that way at all, then," retorted Mia. "Not I, indeed! I'm very glad to go, Reuben. There's naught to do and see in a place like this. There's more than me would be glad to get out of it—Michael would go to-morrow if he could."

Reuben saw an opening for saying what was in his mind.

"Why, I'm not thinkin' of stayin' i' Scarthington myself," he said. "I've said naught to nobody yet, Mia, but I don't mind tellin' you. I've given Mestur Hopkinson back-word."

"You've—what?" said Mia.

"Given Mestur Hopkinson back-word—I'm not goin' to stay on with him," answered Reuben. "We

left the matter open till t' end o' this week, and I've been studyin' about it, and considerin' it one way and another, and I've decided to make a change."

So far Mia was not particularly interested.

"Oh!" she said. "Well—and where do you think of going?"

Reuben, who had by this time allowed his pipe to go out, looked at her with a sly smile.

"Why," he said, "I think I shall have a try at Clothford, Mia."

Mia's wits were sharp enough—the full significance of Reuben's announcement suddenly flashed upon her. She stared at him as if he had proclaimed an interference with her own plans.

"Clothford!" she exclaimed. "Why, what can you do at Clothford? There's no farming at Clothford, Reuben."

"There's other jobs than farming that I can do," said Reuben stoutly. "I were talking to a man last night when I went into the Plough and Harrow to have an odd glass—a chap that had worked at Clothford in his time, and he said that you could get rare good jobs there. He advised me to try for a policeman, did that there man—he says them chaps gets paid uncommon well, and gets pensions in the end. So happen I shall consider it—I shall have a look round first."

While Reuben had been speaking Mia had quickly reckoned up what the consequences of his going to Clothford would be. It was her great wish to be

free of the old surroundings; to have nothing to fetter her; she had already come to the conclusion from her preliminary inspection of Rachel Weare that she would have pretty much her own way in the Mortimer household. But if Reuben took up his residence in Clothford he would be a perpetual menace to her liberty; he was of the sort who would hang about; who would expect to share her Sunday afternoons or evenings; to exercise a certain right of proprietorship. And none of these things would be agreeable to Mia.

"Oh, Reuben," she said, "I think you're making a great mistake. I've heard it said when I was stopping at Clothford how difficult it was to get work there, and besides, when you've been used to out-of-door work all your life, why, it would affect your health. Don't be silly, Reuben—tell Mr. Hopkinson you'll stop with him—you know what a good place it is."

"Aw, t' place is right enough," agreed Reuben. "I couldn't wish for no better. An' he offered me a rise this year, an' all."

"Then you are silly not to take it," said Mia. "Just as silly as you would be if you went to Clothford."

Reuben's face fell.

"Why, Mia," he said, "I—I thowt 'at if I went to Clothford we should be able to see each other. You can't deny," he went on, gathering courage, "you can't deny, Mia, for all you said t'other night, that

we been keepin' company, as the sayin' goes, and of course you know very well what a deal I think on you, and so it's nat'ral that I should want to see you now and agen."

Mia bent her head, apparently in maiden modesty; in reality because she was thinking deeply.

"There's no reason, Reuben," she said, at last, "no reason why you shouldn't stop at Mr. Hopkinson's and still see me now and again. Clothford's not so far away as all that."

Reuben leaned forward in his chair with an eager face.

"Aye, but should I be welcome, Mia?" he asked in a strained voice. "I'd travil a good deal further nor Clothford to see you so long as I were certain that you wanted to see me."

Mia bent her head and lowered her voice.

"Of course I should like to see you," she said. "I can have as much time as I like to go out then, and you could come and see me on a Sunday, because Mrs. Weare said I could have all Sunday from breakfast till supper—there was nothing to do. And there's early and late trains on a Sunday for cheap fares, Reuben, so you could come when you liked. Only promise to stop at Mr. Hopkinson's, because you're getting good wages and it's a good place."

"I'll promise owt!" said Reuben joyfully. "Owt at all, so long as you'll let me come and see you, Mia—and—and be as we used to be before what you said t'other night—howsomever, we'll say

naught no more about that. And, Mia, if so be as you'll try to think well o' me and——"

"I won't promise naught, Reuben," said Mia, disengaging the hand which Reuben had at last dared to possess himself of. "I'm too young to think of such things, and it'll be time enough for you to mention them in a year or two. And besides," she concluded with a glance that made Reuben's pulses thrill, "I don't know what more you want—I bought you a fine necktie, and I've said you could come and see me—so there! But remember, you've got to stop at Mr. Hopkinson's!"

X

BELFORD, since Linacre's eventful visit, had twice gone up to Thomas Green's cottage to acquaint him with his good news and to repay the money which the market-gardener had lent him, and on both occasions had found the old man out. Not certain that Rebecca knew anything of the matter he had hesitated about leaving the money with her and had waited until Sunday to see Thomas at the chapel. He touched him on the elbow as they came out together after the evening service.

"If you'll be at home to-morrow morning, Mestur Green, about breakfast-time," he said, "I'll step up—I could like a word or two with you. I have called in twice, but I were that unlucky to find you away."

"Sure to be at home of a Monday, Mestur Belford," answered the market-gardener. "Come up, sir, come up! No trouble, I hope, neighbour?" he added, glancing at the farmer.

"No, sir—on the contrary," answered Belford. "No—I've had some good news, Mestur Green, thank the Lord! But it's a business matter, sir—we mo'n't talk of it on the Lord's day—I'll step up in the mornin'."

Next morning, unlocking his old bureau after he had eaten his breakfast, Belford took from a secret drawer the bank-notes which Linacre had handed to him, and putting them in his pocket set off to Old Wellington's cottage. It was a beautiful autumn morning and a mellow sunlight flooded the atmosphere of silvery grey that hung about Down-Town; something in it and in the crisp air added to the lightness of heart which Belford felt because he was able to discharge his debt to Thomas Green. He was still enthusiastic in his gratitude to Linacre; at market on the previous Saturday he had not been slow to proclaim that gentleman's goodness to several members of their communion, all of whom had been conversant with Belford's difficulties and struggles, and it gave him a sense of pleasure now to be able to blow Linacre's trumpet before the market-gardener. Only himself, in short, could tell the depth of Belford's gratitude; the money owing to Mortimer had been like a millstone hung about his neck; lightened of such a load he felt that there was still some hope for him and his, and he intended that morning to discuss with Thomas Green the best way of laying out his small farm to better advantage. Had the people about Down-Town been more observant they might have noticed that Belford held his head a good deal higher, and that his step was a great deal lighter, as he went up the stone-paved ginnel to Old Wellington's open door.

Stepping in with a cheery salutation on his lips,

Belford was suddenly conscious that trouble had fallen on the house of his neighbour. Old Wellington sat at the breakfast table in his favourite elbow-chair; his head was bowed in his hands; his whole attitude was that of a man who had received a sudden and unexpected blow. Rebecca, who had evidently started up from the table in such haste that she had overturned her chair, stood by the old man's side, one hand resting on his shoulder, the other grasping a letter which she was reading over to herself with staring eyes and knit brows.

She looked up as she heard Belford's step on the threshold, and recognizing him, motioned him to come forward; the old man, whose head was shaking, seemed to hear nothing.

"Dear, dear, I'm afraid there's trouble, 'Becca," said Belford, stepping into the house. "I hope it's no bad news."

Rebecca came nearer to him and spoke in a low voice.

"It's about the bank that he had all his money in," she said. "I'm afraid there's something very wrong. The news is that sudden, and it struck him all of a heap."

She went back to her father and laid her hand on him affectionately.

"Come, father, come!" she said. "Don't take on so about it—perhaps it's not as bad as you think. Come, father!"

The old man uttered a deep groan, shook himself,

and sitting up, opened his eyes and saw Belford. He smiled in a wan fashion.

"Eh, neighbour!" he said. "You said something last night about good news, and I were glad for you—it's been my turn to have bad news this morning—bad news! Well—the Lord's will be done!"

"Drink a drop of your tea, father," urged Rebecca, who had fetched a bottle of spirits from the cupboard and poured some of the contents into the old man's cup. "It'll revive you."

"I shall be better directly," he said. "I—I'd never expected to hear such news. Give that paper to Mestur Belford, 'Becca—he'll understand it."

Belford took the letter which Rebecca handed to him and read it over with slow and painstaking deliberation. It was a formal communication from an official to the effect that a certain private bank which had its head office in London and numerous branches throughout the country, and had been noted for paying a very high rate of interest on deposits, had suspended payment, with the result, it was feared, that there would be little available for its numerous creditors.

"Dear, dear!" said Belford, laying the letter down with a grave face. "That's sad hearing, Mestur Green, very sad hearing. But as 'Becca says, happen it may not be as bad as you fear."

The market-gardener shook his head.

"Mestur Belford," he said, "I'm afraid it's a judgment on me for wantin' more nor what I'd a

right to expect. I allowed myself to be persuaded to put my savings into that there bank, sir, because they paid such good interest on money left on deposit—I were too greedy, Mestur Belford.”

“There’s nobody could ever call you that, father!” exclaimed ‘Becca.

“Too greedy, my lass, I say—I should ha’ been content with what I were gettin’,” affirmed the old man. “But you see, I were assured it were safe—Lawyer Thorpe recommended it to me and he’d a good deal in it himself—and I wanted to save as much as I could for ‘Becca here, Mestur Belford, you’ll understand. Well, it’s gone now—but me and the old donkey are none done yet—we shall make a good many journeys to market and back yet, please God! Sit you down, Mestur Belford, and take a dish of tea—I’ve no doubt you’ve breakfasted already, but you’ll drink another cup. Aye—it’s a lesson to be satisfied with reasonableness, is that!”

Belford sat down and took the cup of tea which Rebecca handed to him.

“Why, sir,” he said, “I hope it’ll please the Lord to spare you to make a good many journeys yet, and I hope matters mayn’t be as bad as they seem to threaten. I don’t know, Mestur Green, whether you told ‘Becca here of your kindness to me t’other day?—I’m sure I don’t mind if you did.”

Old Wellington nodded his head; Rebecca nodded hers, too, with a sad smile, which indicated that she recognized the farmer’s confidence in her.

"Well, sir," continued Belford, pulling out the notes which he had brought in his breast pocket, "it so happens that I'm enabled to repay that money at once. It looks like an act of Providence, Mestur Green, that I am, for happen the amount'll be useful to you yourself just now, sir. Howsomever, there the money is, sir, and deeply thankful I am to you for standin' by me in the day of trouble as you did, Mestur Green, and if there's aught, though I'm but a poor reed to lean upon, that I can do for you—why, say the word, sir."

The market-gardener was as much surprised by this development as he had been by the news of his ill-fortune; he looked from Reuben to the bank-notes, and from the bank-notes to Reuben as if he scarcely understood.

"Why, why, Mestur Belford!" he exclaimed. "Have you come into a legacy or what's happened? Well, now, to be sure! See what Providence does, both of you! If I had not drawn that there money out of the bank for you, sir, it would ha' gone, too. And now it's saved. An' you're sure you can do without it, neighbour?"

"Certain sure, many thanks to you, Mestur Green," replied the farmer. "But it's only right, sir, that I should narrate to you and your dowter how I came to be so circumstanced as to be able to repay you so quickly. I believe in honourin' them, Mestur Green, that's deservin' of honour, and though you haven't the opinion of him that I have i mun inform

you that I'm beholden to Mestur Simon Linacre for that money and for a deal of kindness beside."

A slight shade passed over Old Wellington's face on hearing this and he looked at the notes lying on the table as if he were half-doubtful about them, but he signed to Belford to proceed and listened attentively to the story which the farmer told of Linacre's dealings with him. Rebecca, who, so far as she knew, had never seen Mr. Linacre, exclaimed loudly in praise of his kindness and generosity; Old Wellington, however, displayed no corresponding enthusiasm, and at the end of Belford's story simply told him that he was glad the circuit steward had come forward to help him. Belford felt that the market-gardener still cherished some dislike or suspicion of Linacre and said no more; he uttered his renewed regrets at the sudden change in Thomas's own fortunes and his hopes that things might not be as bad as they threatened, and went away.

Left alone with his daughter, Old Wellington sat for some time staring absent-mindedly at the fire. Rebecca, who knew his moods, said nothing; she occupied herself in clearing away the breakfast things. After some time her father spoke.

"Well, joy, we're better off nor what yon poor man is!" he said. "I'm proud to say that I owe no man a single penny. After all, we've a deal to be thankful for, 'Becca, my lass. I've got my health; I've got my business; we owe naught, and here's

forty pounds saved from the ruins. Praise the Lord!"

Rebecca kissed him heartily.

"That's right, father," she said.

He patted her arm and looked at her anxiously.

"Aye, my lass," he said, "but there'll be disappointments. I'd planned how we might manage the Canada business, you and Michael and me—I thought we could do it this coming spring, and he could make an arrangement to send his mother and sister enough keeping money from there, and so he could if this hadn't happened, but now—dear, dear!"

"Never mind, father," said Rebecca. "Michael and me's young yet, and we're not going to be afraid. Only don't you trouble—there's lots to be thankful for."

"You're right, joy!" replied the old man. "Aye, lots to be thankful for. I'm better off, better off a deal nor poor Belford is."

XI

THE week which elapsed between Mia's acceptance of the situation at Mr. Mortimer's and her departure from home was naturally one of many goings to-and-fro between the family roof-tree and Mrs. Gouldsbury's cottage, where many interesting operations were being carried out in the way of preparing the young woman's outfit. As Mia herself from the time she had been promoted to long frocks had always taken good care to see that she was well provided with everything, any great outlay had seemed unnecessary, but although Keziah was economical even to the very verge of parsimony she was intensely proud and she declared that for the credit of the family Mia must go to her first place with a full chest. She unearthed stores of linen and of dress stuffs which nobody knew she possessed, and for the next few days after the return from Clothford Mrs. Gouldsbury and two women whom she pressed into service were stitching far into the night. And having nothing to do Mia usually found her way to Mrs. Gouldsbury's cottage of an afternoon or an evening and watched while the others worked. It was one of her chief characteristics that she could do nothing with great grace; some people's idleness is oppressive and irritating; Mia could loll in a chair, or

lounge against a chimney-piece, in a fashion that made those who saw her feel that she was doing exactly what Nature had intended her to do.

The interior of Mrs. Gouldsbury's cottage was a pleasant place for anyone to lounge in. The whole cottage was a curiosity. It stood at an angle of the churchyard, a tall, four-square building in shape and appearance closely resembling the old peels or fortresses which one meets in the neighbourhood of the Tweed and the Cheviots. Its very high upper storey, covered by an almost flat, deep-eaved roof, had in its time been used as the parson's pigeon-cote; a modern transformation of church, churchyard, and surroundings had converted it into a choir vestry and had pierced its grey walls with lancet windows. Beneath it were two other storeys; the intermediate one was Mrs. Gouldsbury's sleeping chamber, the lower was Mrs. Gouldsbury's living and work-room. There was a pleasant sense of mediævalism about a residence in this room; it was like living at the bottom of a high tower; its windows were set deeply in the thick walls, and on stormy nights the wind howled in strange cadences around the lofty roof. It had been empty, this lower part of the old *columbarium*, when Mrs. Gouldsbury came to the village; she had seen and admired it, and when she had established her footing as a nurse and made herself indispensable she asked the tenancy of it as a favour, and readily obtained it, most folk wondering how she cared to live in an old place whose windows

looked out upon the churchyard and therefore upon possible ghosts and goblins.

To Mia, who had a natural taste for anything that was pretty, this curiously situated living room was always a haunt of wonder and fascination. Whoever she was and wherever she came from, Mrs. Gouldsbury possessed some fine old furniture, some quaint and interesting pictures, and such odds and ends of china, bric-à-brac, old samplers and similar relics of a bygone age as could only have come out of some ancient house. All these things had arrived when Mrs. Gouldsbury had moved from her lodgings into the old pigeon-house, and had been arranged by her about the living room with a sure eye to effect. Knowing folk like the people from the Hall and the vicarage who saw Mrs. Gouldsbury's possessions, argued a good deal from them and kept their own counsel as to their thoughts.

On the night before her departure for Clothford, Mia, waiting late at Mrs. Gouldsbury's for the completion of some clothing which she wished to carry back to the cottage, was wandering restlessly up and down the room, while the dressmaker and another woman, Lucy Perkins, who went out sewing anywhere and everywhere for fifteen-pence a day and her meals, and was celebrated as the biggest gossip in the neighbourhood, stitched busily away at the linen which Keziah had presented to her sister out of her stores. She had sat in all the old chairs, looked at all the old pictures, examined the old pic-

tures, handled all the old china, watched Mrs. Gouldsbury's and Lucy's needles flash in and out and was still restless. Lucy Perkins, a quaintly shaped little woman with a queer face half-hidden behind very large spectacles, looked at her speculatively.

"Upon my word, Mia!" she exclaimed, "you're worse nor one o' them wild beasts that comes round with the menageries at fair times! Why can't you sit down and bide quiet?"

"Because I can't," answered Mia. "I'm restless."

"Do a bit of plain sewing, then," said Lucy. "You've never put a single stitch into all these here things—I'm sure I don't know whatever'll happen to you if you ever come to have to mend aught. Can you sew, Mia?"

"No, I can't," answered Mia sharply. "I hate it!"

"Lord sakes, hear that now!" said Lucy. "Did you ever hear the like from a christened young woman, Mrs. Gouldsbury?"

"Yes, many a time," answered Mrs. Gouldsbury. "Many a time, Lucy."

"Then you've known some queer folks," said the seamstress. "They never asked gels in my time whether they liked sewing or not. They gave 'em a seam as soon as they could hold a needle, and they had to do it. And if Mia there had been put to her seam she'd ha' been helpin' us now instead o' walkin' up and down like a tiger in a cage."

"Mia's excited about going away to-morrow,"

said Mrs. Gouldsbury. "Here, Mia, I'll give you something to look at until these things are ready. Here's an old album that I found in the bottom of a trunk the other day—it's got a lot of old photographs in it—look at the fashions. These were in the crinoline times, Lucy," she added, turning to the seamstress, "and very curious the pictures look now."

"Aye, I'll warrant!" replied Lucy. "I remember them crinolines very well—I never wore one myself, but I've seen them as did. Mrs. Daubeny tried one on 'em, and came to church in it, and got stuck fast somehow in the door of their pew, and th' old Colonel—only he weren't old then—sweered so that she never put it on no more. Oh, I remember 'em—they were like a gret poll-parrot cage wi' the bottom knocked out."

Mia turned over the leaves of the old album with languid interest. The photographs were of the fifties and sixties; it seemed to her that the men were frights and the women frumps. There were crinolines and pork-pie hats; elastic-sided boots and peg-top trousers; large chignons and long whiskers; the people seemed to belong to some age before the flood. Suddenly a face attracted her notice; then arrested her attention.

"Mrs. Gouldsbury," she said, "who's that?"

Mrs. Gouldsbury, just then threading a needle, bent over the table and glanced at the faded photograph which Mia was contemplating.

"That's one of my mother, Mia," she answered.

"My!" exclaimed Mia. "It is like Mrs. Weare—Mr. Mortimer's housekeeper, you know, where I'm going. It's the picture of her, if the dresses were different. I knew there was somebody Mrs. Weare reminded me of, too, all the time I was talking to her, but I couldn't think who it was. Of course it wasn't your mother, Mrs. Gouldsbury, because you never showed me this album before. It was you."

"Oh?" said Mrs. Gouldsbury. "And you didn't see it until you saw the old photograph, Mia?"

"This photograph reminded me of it," said Mia. "She's like this, and she's like you, Mrs. Gouldsbury—she's about your height and build—happen a bit thinner than you are—but her hair's white."

"Then I suppose she's very good-looking?" said Mrs. Gouldsbury, smiling at Lucy. "Is she, Mia?"

"No," replied Mia with a bluntness that would not have done discredit to Keziah. "But she has been once upon a time—anybody could see that. Of course, her hair's grey now, and she's got a queer scar on one side of her face, and——"

"What kind of a scar, Mia?" asked Mrs. Gouldsbury.

"It looks like a burn or something of that sort," replied Mia. "But she's a queer sort of woman altogether, is Mrs. Weare—she walks about the house as quiet as a ghost."

"Well, it'll be a good thing for you to have somebody quiet about you," remarked Lucy Perkins.

"And I'm sure I hope they'll reduce you to a Christian frame o' mind instead o' imitatin' bears and tigers fastened up i' cages—nay, she's at it again!" she exclaimed, as Mia closed the old album and began to wander about the room once more. "Did you ever see the like, I say!"

Mrs. Gouldsbury understood the girl's restlessness. She wanted to be free of her present surroundings. She marvelled somewhat when, the sewing being finished, and the linen made up into a large parcel, Mia calmly sat down and said she would wait the arrival of Reuben Gaunt, who had promised to call at the pigeon-house to carry the parcel home for her.

XII

AFTER Mia's departure for Clothford the wheels of life rolled on in Down-Town in the same steady fashion. Keziah's appointed tasks were approached, attacked, and vanquished in due course; now that her sister had gone she had somewhat more on her hands, for Mia had largely relieved her of attendance on their mother. Labour of any sort, however, was meat and drink to Keziah; she had been born to it, she would say, showing her bare arms, which were all sinew and bone, and when she could work no longer she would lay down and die. Work, indeed, was the particular order of the days that winter amongst the Lambert circle; Thomas Green, finding that the first bad news was correct, and that the greater part of his savings had gone for ever, began speculating in potatoes, always with a keen eye to the avoidance of further losses, while his daughter, who had most of the day left on her hands, devoted herself to fancy knitting, and with Mrs. Daubeny's help worked up such a connection that her time was fully occupied. These two, with Michael, were still cherishing the idea of life in a new land; all their efforts were directed to this object. As for Michael he, too, found an opportunity of augmenting his wages; his constant attendance at the night-school

for several years had made him an adept at penmanship and at figures; he began to keep books for the carpenter, the blacksmith, and the general shopkeeper, all of whom until that time had relied on rough and ready methods of accountancy, and had suffered accordingly.

To Reuben the chief difficulty of existence was to get through the time which elapsed between his visits to Mia. Arrayed in his best, gay with the multi-coloured necktie, and further set off with a new overcoat which he had purchased when the balance of his year's wages was paid to him, he made his first visit to Clothford on the Sunday which succeeded Mia's arrival in the town, and every alternate Sunday thereafter saw him making the same journey. So long as the Sunday afternoons remained fine, and it was possible to walk in the parks, Mia had no great objection to these visits, but as winter set in, and rain and snow made themselves evident and unpleasant, she began to think that an afternoon spent by a warm fire in the company of a novelette and a paper of sweets was preferable to walking out with Mr. Gaunt. She had no desire to introduce him to Mr. Mortimer's house, and it was sometimes difficult to know what to do with him. Once she had taken him to see the only people she knew in Clothford, the relatives of Hetty Green's with whom she and Hetty had stayed on the visit which made her dissatisfied with village life, but the experiment had not been a success. There were young people in that

family—girls who were employed in shops and young men who worked in offices or warehouses; all were town-bred and pert; Reuben's rustic manners and slowness of speech seemed to them fit subjects for cheap wit. Mia had sufficient sense to resent their rudeness, but she never took Reuben there again, and sometimes the Sunday afternoons hung heavily. True, there was the museum and the art gallery to turn into, but Mia had no taste for articulated bones and geological specimens, and the latter were no more to Reuben than the stones which his plough turned over in Mr. Hopkinson's fields. Nor were either of them educated up to pictures; Mia had a vague sense that the canvases at which they gazed were beautiful, and Reuben, seeing that they were treated with great respect, stared at them with reverential awe, wondering how they were done, but quite unable to see that they were any finer than the picture almanacks which the grocers sent round to their customers at Christmas. Loafing about in this way made Mia tired; Reuben was never a great conversationalist, and while he had that dog-like affection which is amply rewarded by the sense of nearness, Mia required amusement and variety. And so one Saturday morning, when he was looking forward to the next day's fortnightly visit, Reuben received a letter from Mia putting him off—she would be unable, she said, to meet him next day, and she was not sure about the following Sunday either—she had an idea that she would not be able to get out.

That day Reuben chanced to foregather with Michael outside the blacksmith's shop whither they had repaired, Reuben to get a horse shod, and Michael to have some fettling-irons put in order. Sitting on the low fence in the blacksmith's yard they began to talk.

"Going to Clothford tomorrow, Reuben?" asked Michael.

Reuben shook his head and looked glum.

"No," he answered. "I were goin', Michael, but I've had back-word from Mia. She's going to be busy to-morrow—company, or summat—so she can't get out. And very likely t' next Sunday, too," he added, looking increasedlly glum.

Michael laughed.

"Well, you've gone pretty regular since Mia went, lad," he said. "If I were you, Reuben, I shouldn't go so oft."

"What for?" demanded Reuben.

"Why, because of expense," answered Michael who at that time was very keen on economy. "Just look what it costs! You don't do it for naught."

"It cert'ny does cost summat," agreed Reuben after a due period of cogitation.

"Aye, of course it does," said Michael. "If you go at it a whole year it'll make a nice hole in your year's wages. I'll lay aught you've never reckoned it up?"

"No, I haven't," exclaimed Reuben. "Of course, ye have to pay for them sort o' does."

"If ye're soft enough to pay for 'em," said Michael. "Now, how much does your ticket cost?"

"Three shillin', there and back," replied Reuben.

"Well, then there's your dinner," suggested Michael. "You'll none go without that. How much is it?"

"Aw, I always get a bit of dinner," said Reuben. "I found a cookshop where you can get a good dinner for a shillin'—sometimes it's fourteen-pence."

"And then you'll have a pint after it?" said Michael. "That's another four-pence—in Clothford."

Reuben nodded his head.

"And then I expect you and Mia go and have your teas somewhere," suggested the economist. "How much does that come to?"

"Happen another two shillin'," answered Reuben.

"Then that's three shillin's your ticket, and eighteen-pence your dinner and your ale, and two shillin' your tea—that's six-and-six, and I expect you buy Mia some spice, so we'll say seven shillin'," said Michael. "And if you go once a fortnight that's twenty-six times a year, and twenty-six times seven is a hundred and eighty-two, and a hundred and eighty-two shillin' is nine pound two, Reuben, my lad—say ten pound. It's a nice lump out o' your wage, is that, what?"

"By Gow!" exclaimed Reuben. "Is it as much as all that? Why, ten pound 'ud——"

"Ten pound 'ud buy three suits o' good clothes,"

said Michael. "Ten pound 'ud buy a lot o' chairs and tables, and such like. Just consider that, Reuben, my lad."

Reuben's face became grave and approached gradually to melancholy.

"Aye," he said, with a deep sigh, "but it's none so very pleasant when your young woman lives all that way off!"

"The more brass you save the nearer you'll bring her to you," said Michael, with an air of great wisdom. "Just consider that, my lad. Why, what would you do if you were a soldier and went out to th' wars?"

"Aye, but I'm not a sojer, and I'm not goin' out to no wars!" replied Reuben. "Howsomever, ten pound's a lot o' money, Michael—I'm no gre't hand at reckonin'; it never struck me 'at seven shillin' a fortnight 'ud come to all that there. Why, it's more than a year's rent of a cottage!"

"It's the rent of any two cottages i' Scarthington, Reuben," answered Michael, "and you'd get the pick of 'em at that."

Reuben scratched his head and made a face.

"Well, I mun go now and then," he said ruefully. "Mia were saying last time I were there that it was a gre't expense. But a month seems a long time to wait, like, to see your young woman, ye know. Michael, lad—it's all right for you, 'cause you can see 'Becca every day."

"It 'ud make no difference to me in t' real way if

I didn't see 'Becca for a whole year," answered Michael. "And neither 'Becca nor me 'ud think it right to spend ten pounds in a year just i' travellin' expenses. Why, Mia's none gone to t' North Pole!"

If Reuben had but known it he was at that moment fated not to see Mia again for a long time. It was then drawing near to Christmas; Reuben and Mia had talked more than once of his spending Boxing-Day in Clothford and of their going to the pantomime together. It was not at that time the custom for bank-holidays to be observed in the farming villages, but Reuben asked and readily obtained a whole day off from Mr. Hopkinson and duly acquainted Mia with the fact by letter, asking her at the same time to meet him at their usual trysting-place, outside the station at Clothford, at noon on the day in question. He was there at the appointed time, eager and anticipating, for he had not seen Mia for a month; moreover he had a present for her in his pocket, a silver locket, fashioned in the shape of a heart. But no Mia met him, and though he hung about until his bones began to ache with the cold of a particularly bitter day he saw nothing of her. And at last he broke a rule she had laid down, and going to Mortimer's house rang the bell and asked Rachel Weare if Mia was in.

Rachel looked at him with curiosity—No, she said, Mia had been out since early in the morning; she thought she had gone home. But of that she was not sure.

Reuben went back to the village and straight to the Lamberts' cottage. No Mia had presented herself there, and by that time the afternoon was nearly over.

XIII

TO KEZIAH the mere fact that that day was regarded as a legalized holiday, and that it was the morrow of one of the principal feasts of the Christian year, was of no importance whatever—in spite of its semi-sacred character she had selected it as the day whereon the Lambert pig of that year was to meet its fate. There was only one pig-killer in Scarthington, and his services had been in such request for three weeks before Christmas that Keziah had finally decided to let the pig live until Christmas was over. Then the pig-killer suggested that Boxing-Day would be a nice, quiet occasion, and as it did not clash with Keziah's weekly wash, its early morning was settled upon. When Reuben called at the cottage on his return from Clothford the pig had been dead for many hours, and while the greater part of its remains hung in state in the lean-to, Keziah and the muffin-maker, each habited in large white aprons with bibs, were cutting up certain other parts in accordance with that good old rustic custom which ordains that when you kill a fat pig you must send a plateful of its fry to your intimate friends and acquaintance.

Reuben, who was feeling very doleful after the

disappointment of the day, looked round about him as soon as he entered the cottage, but made no immediate mention of his object in calling.

"Been pig-killin'?" he said, glancing at the operations. "How did it kill?"

"Why, it killed a rare good 'un," answered Keziah. "Step into t' back-place and have a look at it—you can take that candle."

Reuben went into the lean-to and carefully inspected the defunct's suspended corpse. He returned presently and set the candle down again.

"Matter o' four-and-thirty stone, I should think," he said laconically.

"That's what our Michael reckoned on," said Keziah, "but James Moorby, t' pig-slayer, he said it might be a stone more or a stone less. Howsomever, I'm sure it were well done to, were that pig—it were so well fed 'at there were times when it seemed to turn its nose up at its vittles, just like a Christian. An' pray what ha' you gotten your best things on for, Reuben?"

"Nay, I been to Clothford," answered Reuben, who was now assured that Mia was not at home, and was accordingly further reduced in spirits.

"To Clothford, eh?" said Keziah. "Why, of course it's what they call t' bank-holiday, though I'm sure I don't know what that means. Well, and how were Mia?"

"I didn't see her," replied Reuben. "She were out."

"Out?—what all day long?" exclaimed Keziah. Reuben nodded.

"I can't understand it," he said. "I wrote her a letter tellin' her 'at I'd meet her outside t' station at half-past twelve and take her to see t' pantymime at t' theayter, an'——"

Keziah laid down her knife and gazed at Reuben with eyes of stern enquiry.

"Take her—where?" she said. "Did you say theayter, Reuben Gaunt?"

"Why, there's no harm in goin' to t' theayter that I know on," answered Reuben, almost sullenly. "An' I know Mia goes there pretty oft, 'cause she's telled me about the pieces she's seen there."

Keziah dropped into a chair and began to rock herself to and fro. She commenced a mournful wailing.

"Oh, dear, oh, dear, oh, dear!" she cried. "To think o' my sister goin' to wicked places like them there! I could ha' soon as thowt on her carryin' on wi' t' Owd Lad hisself, or turnin' a Papist, or summat o' that sort. And her browt up that religious, and me goin' reg'ler to t' chappil, and bein' a member o' society an' all! I wonder what godly men like Mestur Linacre 'ud say to such goin's on."

"Why, they know about it where she lives," said Reuben. "An' theer's nowt wrong i' t' theayter—afore I come to live at Mestur Hopkinson's I used to go to Grandminster theayter offens—it were all

right, were that, and stood next door to t' Minster an' all."

Keziah, however, continued to bewail Mia's wickedness.

"And so you never saw her?" she said at last.

"Never set eyes on her," growled Reuben, whose equanimity was sorely disturbed.

"No, I'll warrant you!" said Keziah. "If our Mia's started theayter-goin' it's sartin sure she's run away wi' one o' them play-actin' chaps. That's what young lasses allus does when they go to theayters, and circuses, and such-like wiles o' Satan. They get that there 'mazed wi' t' fine talk and t' grand clothes 'at they lose what senses they have—and well Sarah Mary Lightowler there knows it. Oh, dear—oh, dear!"

"Aye, it's a bad job for young gels when they get theayter-goin'," sighed the muffin-maker. "There's no ho'din' 'em after that."

Reuben rose and put on his hat.

"Well, I never heard such a lot o' soft talk i' my life!" he said. "I don't suppose eyther on you's ever seen a theayter i' your lives, nor knows owt about it."

"No, and doesn't want neyther, Mestur Reuben Gaunt!" exclaimed Keziah, eager for the fray. "An' I wonder what right you have to take my sister to pantymimes, whatever they may be—nowt good, I'll warrant, if they be in a theayter. But I'll learn you and Mia summat—I'll away to Clothford and give

her a piece o' my mind, an' I shall tell her mistress that she's not to be allowed out, so there!"

"I thowt you said 'at you expected she'd run away wi' one o' t' play-actin' chaps," said Reuben, sarcastically.

"An' I expect she has, an' all!" retorted Keziah. "She were allus silly i' that way, were our Mia—her an' that Hetty Green were allus readin' them penny books about lords and ladies and such-like fondness, instead o' meditatin' on t' tracts an' t' Good Book. Aye, I expect she's run away wi' some on 'em!—it's what allus comes o' young lasses goin' to t' theayter."

"Well, I think ye owt to be ashamed o' yoursen', Keziah, for sayin' such things about your sister," said Reuben indignantly. "You've no call to do it. I expect Mia didn't get my letter," he went on reflectively. "I've heard that letters does go wrong and's offens late at Christmas time, and very like she'd made other arrangements about spendin' t' day. An' I'm none goin' to have neyther you nor anybody else sayin' owt agen her," he concluded half-angrily. "I see no harm in a young woman goin' to t' play if she behaves hersen."

"Now then, ye can go and crow somewhere else, my lad!" said Keziah. "I'm none goin' to have you tellin' me my duty. Off you go, and if I hear o' you takin' Mia to pantymimes and theayters, and such-like devil's notions agen, I'll set our Michael on to you, and he'll sort you right, I can tell you!"

"Michael's more sense," said Reuben, and flung out of the cottage. He was sore all round, for in spite of what he had said to Keziah, he felt sure that his letter, written some days previously, must have reached Clothford before Christmas. For the next few days he hoped to hear from Mia every day, but no letter came, and before the end of the week he had made up his mind that he would go to Clothford on the following Sunday, and if Mia was not at the usual place of meeting at the usual time would go to Mortimer's house and boldly ask for her.

Keziah also was meditating a descent upon her sister. In the fullness of her wrath she had written her an angry letter on the morning after Reuben's return from his Boxing-Day visit; no answer to it had reached her, and she began to think seriously of going over to Clothford and ascertaining for herself what Mia was doing. The week wore on to the Saturday, and breakfast-time found Keziah undecided as to her movements. She hesitated until past ten o'clock as to whether or not she should go to Clothford by the afternoon train, and while she was still debating matters Mr. Linacre drove up to the garden gate, and leaving his horse and trap in charge of Tin Tom, who happened just then to be looking out of his door, advanced to the cottage with a solemn and composed countenance, as of one who had a painful duty to perform and had made up his mind that he must do it. At the sight of him Keziah felt that she was going to hear bad news; her hands

were trembling and her face pale when she opened the door.

"Oh, Mestur Linacre!" she exclaimed, before her visitor could cross the threshold. "I'm afraid you've brought bad news, sir—is it aught about my sister?"

Linacre raised his hand.

"Be of good courage, sister," he said. "The maiden appears to be well in bodily health, if somewhat weak in such matters as prudence. We are all erring creatures, sister Lambert."

"What's Mia done and where is she?" asked Keziah. "Reuben Gaunt couldn't find her last Monday, and I've written to her and had no answer. Happen you've heard something, Mestur Linacre?"

Linacre bowed his head and produced two letters from his pocket-book.

"I received a communication from the damsel this morning," he said. "It appears—and I was aware of it yesterday, for I then visited Mr. Mortimer—that she left her excellent and comfortable situation on Monday morning last, and has not returned. The letter which she has written to me conveys her thanks for having procured the situation for her, and states that she has left it to be married."

"Married!" exclaimed Keziah.

"To be married," repeated Linacre. "She further begs me to hand this letter to you, sister Lambert, and this to a young man named Reuben Gaunt, who is, I understand, in the employ of Mr. Hopkinson."

Keziah took the letter which he handed over and

tore it open. There was no date and no address—it was a curt intimation to the effect that Mia was going to be married; that she was all right; and that Keziah could tell their mother or not, just as she thought fit.

“Well, of all the surprises that ever I had!” exclaimed Keziah. “To treat me like that! This is what comes of young gels havin’ too much liberty, Mestur Linacre. I said at the time that Mrs. Weare oughtn’t to let Mia out more than once a week—on a Sunday, say, to go to chappil, and happen for bit of a walk after service were over—young gels has no right to so much freedom.”

“I fear the maiden has been unrestrained,” said Linacre. “There is little to do in my friend Mr. Mortimer’s house, and Mrs. Weare is an easy-going woman. I gather that the young woman has been going out every afternoon, and that she has frequently visited the theatre and the music-hall. This is a sinful generation, sister.”

“Aye, it’s just what I said to Reuben Gaunt!” exclaimed Keziah. “I knew what ’ud come o’ theayter-goin’. She’s run away wi’ one o’ them play-actin’ chaps—that’s what it is. I knew!”

“I confess that that seems a probable explanation,” said Linacre. “It is difficult to solve the matter, sister Lambert, for you see she gives neither address nor her new name. My letter you see, from the postmark, has been posted in London.”

“In London, nay!” said Keziah. “Aye, of course

—that's where all them play-actors comes from. And pray what's gotten all her stocks o' clothes—she were fitted out wi' linen when she left home 'at no lady need been ashamed on, ungrateful young hussy!"

"I understand," replied Linacre, "that she left everything behind her, and has not applied for her goods to be sent."

"Well, I hope she may never know the want of 'em," snapped Keziah. "An' I hope she is married, and not deceived. Howsomever, she's made her own bed, and she may lie on it. Such ingratitude, when so much has been done for her—and your kindness thrown in your face, too, Mestur Linacre—I'm ashamed."

"We must not expect to receive any reward in this world, sister," said Linacre, rising and buttoning his sombre garments. "I pray all may be well. I will now visit the young man Reuben."

Reuben was discovered at some distance from the farmstead, ploughing. Like Keziah he, too, scented trouble and ill news in Linacre's approach. He gazed at his visitor with a sullen and lowering brow, and made scarcely any response to his greeting. When Linacre, after a few introductory words, gave him the letter his hands trembled so that he could scarcely open it, and when he had read the message—identical with that sent to Keziah—it was as if some giant hand had suddenly struck him senseless. He stared at Linacre as if he did not see him, and

made no answer to his remarks. When Linacre had gone away he remained motionless for a long time, the letter in his hand shaking and fluttering in the chill wind. At last he threw it to the ground and dug his heel into it; then, leaving horses and plough just where Linacre had stopped him in his work, he went straight across the field, stumbling and lurching like a blind man, and made for the village and the kitchen of the Plough and Harrow.

XIV

WHEN Linacre left the cottage Keziah sat down and tried to face the situation with which she was so unexpectedly confronted. She saw no reason to doubt the news; she was well aware that Mia was a creature of impulse, and more than obstinate in having her own way, and she firmly believed that the girl had become infatuated with some man or other whom she had encountered in Clothford, and had run away with him.

"And to think of her leaving all her good things behind her!" she exclaimed to the muffin-maker who, coming in just before noon, was speedily made acquainted with the news. "Everything new she had, and enough to last her a couple o' years and more. And the very best linen, as I'd had put away i' my bottom drawer until such times as it were wanted. Four of every article she had, and all marked wi' her neeshals, to say naught of two bran-new stuff gowns and her best frock—but I lay she'd go away i' that."

"Happen she's wed a chap 'at can afford to dress her i' silks and satins," observed the muffin-maker.

"I know naught about who she's wed," said

Keziah, "but I don't care if it's a millionairer. She'll none get better linen nor what I supplied her wi'. An' I'm sure I don't know what use it 'ud be me tellin' my mother about it—she's been none well this last day or two, an' it 'ud only upset her."

"Eh, why, you mo'nt do that!" said the woman. "No, I should leave things be for a piece. Happen you'll hear more about Mia, later on."

"An' I hope it'll be good hearin'," answered Keziah. "But I've no belief in hole-and-corner work, and if our Mia wanted to get wed she should ha' told her own folks and been wed in a proper manner. I shall none forget this day in a hurry, I can tell you—I never thought to hear such news nor have such trouble thrust on me, and I'm not as chastened i' spirit about it as I ought to be. Christians is flesh and blood after all, and I've got my feelin's same as them 'at doesn't profess religion—so there!"

But neither the day nor Keziah's troubles were at an end. When dinner-time came no Michael arrived; he was always punctual to the minute when he had his dinner at home, and Keziah could not understand his absence. She went out to the garden gate and looked up and down the street, but saw nothing of him; when he was half-an-hour overdue she put his dinner in the oven to keep warm. But it was not until three o'clock that Michael came home, looking sore distressed. He dropped into the nearest chair as soon as he entered the cottage, and groaned from evident weariness.

"Mercy upon us, Michael Lambert!" exclaimed Keziah. "What on earth's the matter? Has aught happened?"

"Matter enough!" said Michael. "Make me a cup of tea, Keziah—I'm fair beat. Has Reuben been here?"

"Reuben! No, I've seen no Reuben," answered Keziah, setting the kettle on the fire. "What for?"

"Nay!" replied Michael with an air of vexation. "I wondered if he had. They sent for me from Hopkinson's at near on to twelve o'clock to say that Reuben had left his horses standing in their Twelve-Acre and they didn't know where he'd gone—they couldn't find him nowhere about the place. When I got there they'd just heard that he was at the Plough and Harrow, drinking, and so I set off to fetch him away. Eh, dear, dear!—I had a job with him. He was that far gone, Keziah, that he behaved like a madman—we had to fetch the policeman and the doctor—the doctor quietened him at last with some stuff, and he's asleep now. What can it all have been about—he raved about naught but Mia, only you couldn't make head or tail of it."

"Well, it is Mia, then," said his sister. "The news has turned t' poor lad's head—they shouldn't ha' filled him any drink at the Plough—he'd be half-mad as it were before he got there."

"But what's it all about?" asked Michael. "I tell you he did naught but rave and curse, and then he took to crying, and then he raved again. Somebody

said Mr. Linacre had been seen going up the lane to Hopkinson's Twelve-Acre—has he been here?"

"Aye, he has been here!" replied Keziah. "And he's been to Reuben an' all, and that's what thrown t' lad out of his senses."

"Well, but what did he come for?" enquired Michael.

"He came to say 'at Mia had run away from her situation to get wed wi' some chap or another," said Keziah, throwing her sister's note down on the table before him. "Read that there!"

Michael read the brief communication with a frown. He shook his head as he put the letter back in its envelope.

"Eh, dear, dear!" he said. "This is bad news, Keziah. We shall have to find out all about it."

"An' where are you goin' to start, I would like to know?" she demanded. "The letter in which that there and one that came for Reuben were in, were posted from London, and by all accounts you might as well look for a needle in a haystack as look for anybody in London. Nay, Mia's cutten herself clean away and she'll do as she likes."

"Well, don't say aught to my mother," he said. "It's no use telling her about it."

"I'm not goin' to," answered Keziah. "But she'll have to know sooner or later. She were askin' this mornin' why Mia hadn't been to see her."

"Let it wait a bit," said Michael.

If they had but known it the time was at hand

when it would become impossible to tell the mother anything. That afternoon, as Keziah was steadily performing her Saturday task of straightening up, she heard a sharp cry from the paralyzed woman's chamber, and hastening upstairs saw that a sudden change had come over her. Keziah gave her a stimulant which was always kept in readiness, and rushing back to the cottage door called loudly for help. Her next-door neighbour was quickly with her; the muffin-maker soon followed and together the three women gathered about the invalid's bed and looked at her with anxiety and speculation.

"I'll send our Willie for the doctor and Mrs. Gouldsbury," whispered the next-door woman. "She looks very bad, Keziah—I'm afeared it's th' end. Look how her face has fallen in."

"An' he might call at Mestur Truscott's and ask 'em to send our Michael home," said Keziah. "It's not so long since he went, and he'll very likely be about th' premises."

Other women came into the cottage, crowding about the sick woman's bed as village wives always do when there is the possibility of a death. They watched and whispered, shaking their heads, until Mrs. Gouldsbury arrived and cleared them all out. Then came the doctor, followed by Michael; when the doctor left it was with an intimation to the brother and sister that their mother would not live beyond evening.

Keziah, who in spite of her grim front and sour

speech, had a genuine affection for her family, received the news dry-eyed. She knew in her heart that the death would be a happy release. It was now between nine and ten years since her mother had suffered the stroke which had made her a helpless invalid, and there was no chance of her recovery. All sentiment put aside, it would be better for her to die.

Michael, Keziah, and Mrs. Gouldsbury remained in the chamber—the muffin-maker, who was almost one of the family, was allowed to stay when all else were driven off. Mr. Belford was fetched to pray with the dying woman; she showed no great consciousness of his presence and made no response to his ministrations. But when he had gone she opened her eyes and sought the faces of those about her.

"Where's my dowter Mia?" she asked in a voice which was quite clear and firm.

"Mia's away at service, mother," answered Keziah.

"Oh, aye, to be sure!" said Mrs. Lambert. "Aye, I remember. Well, I shall be gone before she comes, so you can give her my love and tell her to be a good gel."

Nobody made any response to this, and the dying woman shut her eyes again, only to open them once more a few minutes later.

"What did t' doctor say?" she asked.

"He said you were very bad, mother," replied Keziah.

Mrs. Lambert nodded her head. She gazed at Mrs. Gouldsbury and the muffin-maker; then at Michael.

"I want to say summat to you, Keziah," she said. "Send all t'others away—I want to speak to you."

Keziah signed to the others to leave them alone; when they had gone she bent over the bed. Her mother's thin fingers were plucking nervously at the sheets.

"What is it, mother?" she said, thinking that Mrs. Lambert had some further message to give her for Mia.

"There's a matter I wanted to speak of, Keziah," said her mother. "I were never no gre't hand at religion same as what you've been, but I won't die until I've telled a secret 'at I have, and I mun tell you, 'cause I won't tell no parson nor yet preachers. I've none been a bad woman, Keziah—I allus paid my way, and never wasted Lambert's money, and I never spoke no evil of anyone, and I kept th' house as clean and tidy as heart could desire. There's nobody can say naught agen me on them grounds, Keziah. And I never did naught wrong but once—and you mun never, never tell nobody, but you're a woman grown and gettin' on, and I'll tell you, or else I shall never be kept in my grave. You'll none say a word to nobody, Keziah—not even to Michael?"

"No, mother, if you don't want me to," answered Keziah.

"Ye mo'nt—ye mo'nt!" said her mother, almost fiercely. "I'll haunt you if you do. You mun keep it to yoursen, 'cause I weern't go wi'out tellin', Keziah!"

"Yes, mother?" said Keziah.

"Keziah—bend yoursen nearer, 'cause nobody mun hear—Keziah—Mia weren't your father's lawful bairn!"

It seemed to Keziah, hardened as she was to sentiment and trouble, that the world suddenly stood still. She reeled, gasped for breath, found herself clinging to the side of the bed.

"Mother—mother!" she said in a hoarse whisper, glancing about her as if she feared the very walls. "Mother!—you don't know what you're sayin'!"

But the dying woman only nodded her head as emphatically as her failing strength would admit.

"I know as you wouldn't believe it, Keziah, me havin' allus been such a straight woman and a good wife an' mother," she said calmly. "But it's true, and I shall go more comfortable, like, now 'at I've telled you. Gi' me a sup o' brandy, Keziah—and don't you go for to think o' me as a light woman, 'cause I never were, and there's few women can say 'at they've only made one slip i' their lives, so there!"

Keziah gave her brandy and stood gazing at her in utter despair and consternation.

"An' I don't know 'at I've so very much to blame

mysen wi’,” continued her mother, with revived strength. “It were all Lambert’s fault—he shouldn’t ha’ left me as he did. You’ll remember t’ time when Mester Truscott took that there land right away over i’ t’ Low Country, and sent your father there to look after it for a piece—he were away for nigh on to eight months and never come near. An’ that were when t’ machine man came to lodge wi’ us—you’ll remember him, Keziah!—he were a handsome man, were that, a handsome man!”

Keziah remembered the man very well—she also remembered that, although she was then only a girl of ten, she had always been frightened of his good-looking, impudent face and bold, laughing eyes, and had been glad when he left them and the village. She shuddered as she realized all that her mother’s confession meant, and for the first time in her life she began to understand why Mia was so unlike herself and Michael.

“He were all for pleasure and merry-making, were that!” said the dying woman. “Eh, dear—Mia’ll take after him. She had his good looks—folk used to remark ’at you and her were none alike, Keziah, for you were allus ill-favoured. But I knew t’ reason—yes, she favours him, does Mia. And she’ll allus take after him—it’s i’ th’ blood, my lass.”

“Oh, mother, don’t talk about it any more!” pleaded Keziah. “Think about your soul!”

The woman’s face grew hard and cold.

“Now, I’m not goin’ to be worritted at a time like

this," she said peevishly. "I never were a gre't hand at religion. But I been a good sort i' my time, Keziah—I kep' a clean house, and paid my way, and Lambert couldn't ha' found a better wife between here and London town. An' I've ligged here ten year—I've had enough on it."

That night Mrs. Lambert died, and when the body had been prepared for burial, Keziah looked at her dead mother with strange feelings. She knew that she would have to keep the dreadful secret until her own death.

PART THE THIRD
THE PINNING-FEE

I

ON a certain June afternoon, some eighteen months after the death of her mother, Keziah Lambert stood at the door of the cottage, looking across the road towards the gate of Belford's farmstead, from which she was expecting to see Belford presently issue with his old horse and equally ancient trap, a conveyance which seemed to have been built about the time of its owner's birth, and was only brought on great occasions from the recesses of the dusty shed in which it usually stood. There was to be a grand tea-meeting at Normansholt that afternoon at half-past five o'clock, followed by a gathering in the chapel at seven—at the latter, speeches were to be made by a missionary who had recently returned from China, and by certain ministers, and Mr. Simon Linacre, who was now the senior circuit-steward, and had recently gained further honours and popularity amongst his co-religionists by presenting a new pulpit to the chapel, was to take the chair. Keziah had not attended any festivity of this sort since her mother's death, and when Belford offered her a seat in his trap, she accepted the invitation from a vague instinct that it was time she had some diversion. The weight of the secret she carried about with her, the

consciousness of which never left her day or night, had told heavily upon her; the uncertainty about Mia—of whom no one had heard any tidings since her disappearance—was as nothing to it. It seemed to her sometimes that it was choking her, that she must cry it from the house-tops, or stifle under it; at these times she put on her bonnet and went to the churchyard, and over the dead woman's grave renewed her vow that the secret should be hers until her death.

As Keziah stood there, waiting for the farmer, she was thinking in a vague, purposeless way, without attempt to define or to analyze, about the strange developments of this last stage of her life. Everything had altered. Two years before—less—the Lambert family had had little to grieve about beyond the mother's infirmity. The father and son were earning good wages, the household was kept in plenty, and there was no need for Mia to take service. Now the father was dead, and the mother gone with her shame on her soul, and Mia was—who knew where? And Mia's going had brought at any rate one change in another life. Until Simon Linacre came with the bad news Reuben Gaunt had been a sober and steady young man, anxious to save and improve his position; since that day and his terrible outbreak, he had gradually gone from bad to worse, and was now more or less of a blot on the life of the village. Turned out of his work at Hopkinson's farm for neglect and drunkenness, he had remained in Scarthington despite all efforts to remove him. He

had money put by in the bank, and as long as it lasted he spent it—if not at the Plough and Harrow, at the inns in neighbouring villages. Nobody would take him in as a lodger, but he found shelter with Hosea Yardsworth, who, being himself tenant of one of the ownerless cottages in Down-Town, considered that he had a right to admit whomsoever he pleased under his roof. Here Reuben lived the life of a pariah; now and then he got an occasional job, just as Hosea did. When they had money they gave up all work and drank together; there was a fellow-feeling between them, each believing himself to have been deeply wronged, and in their anger they were always friendly.

And there had been more changes in the market-gardener's cottage on the hill-top. Old Wellington, who, bravely as he had borne his losses, had felt them none the less keenly, was brought home one day helpless and speechless. He had been suddenly stricken with paralysis, and though his speech gradually came back to him, the doctor told Rebecca that he would never be able to go about again. Then the seriousness of the loss of Old Wellington's savings was felt; he had made but little money out of his potato business, and if it had not been for the fact that he belonged to a club, and could draw sick pay, he and his daughter would have been badly off indeed. As it was, it taxed all Rebecca's ingenuity to make ends meet, and she and Michael felt that the prospects of a new and wider life were further off

than ever. They were still fastened up in the pinfold by the highway side—impounded by no fault of their own.

“‘Change and decay in all around I see,’” said Keziah, as she stood at the cottage door. “An’ sure I am ’at that there line is as true as owt there is in the Good Book itself. We’m here to-day and gone to-morrow, and there’s nobody can tell what’s goin’ to happen next—I’m sure, after all I’ve gone through, there’s nowt in this vale o’ tears ’at could surprise me—nowt!”

At that moment Belford and his wife emerged from the farmyard in the old trap and Keziah hastened across the road and climbed up into the back seat. The ancient horse stirred itself into a feeble trot, and carried them off through the shady lanes in the direction of Normansholt.

“Well, I’m sure it is an event for you an’ me to go merry-makin’, Keziah,” said Mrs. Belford. “I were sayin’ to our master just now, ’at I don’t know how long it is since I went to a tea-meetin’—longer, I think, nor I can think on.”

“I niver been to nowt since before my poor mother were taken,” answered Keziah, “and it were a piece before that, an’ all, ’at I went to a conversarry as they called it, over at Beechford. But as I weer sayin’ to Henry Simpson this mornin’, it’s a poor heart that never rejoices, and I think you an’ me, Mrs. Belford, has a right as anybody to a bit of a do—I’m sure we bide at home above our share.”

"Aye, I'm sure!" agreed Mrs. Belford. "'Cept-in' for goin' to chappil, and seekin' a few eggs up now and then, I'll warrant I never set foot outside our doors fro' week-end to week-end."

"Well, you'll have grand doin's to-day, both on yer," said Belford. "I understand 'at this here returned missionary fro' China has some very movin' stories to tell—it must be a very interestin' country, that there, apart from the fact that it's where the tea comes from, and I'm lookin' forward to hearing more about it. Then of course there'll be more speech-makin', and there'll be Mestur Linacre in the chair—I'm allus glad to hear Mestur Linacre, he's such a scholar."

Though nothing was said of it, the mention of such things not being considered to be good manners, the minds of Belford's little company were unanimously fixed on the tea-party which was to precede the missionary meeting, and as soon as the farmer had put up his horse and trap at a friend's stable they proceeded towards the schoolroom in which the festivities were to be held. There could be no doubt as to the exact whereabouts of the schoolroom, for it seemed as if half the population of the little town were flocking there, and Keziah expressed her doubts as to whether they would ever get in.

"Well, if we don't get in to the first sittin'-down, we mun see what we can do at the second," said Mrs. Belford good-humouredly. "Of course, I prefer a first sittin'-down, iverything being fresher, as it were,

but so long as they mind to mek' fresh tea, I don't care—I can't abide tea 'at's been on the stew, Keziah, an' never could."

"No, nor me, neither," said Keziah. "But I allus hold 'at you never do get such good tea as you mek' yourself."

"I did hear," observed Belford, who walked loosely along between them, looking very uncomfortable in his best coat, "I did hear that they that's too late for the first sittin'-down can go an' sit in th' chappil till the second's ready, and the organist'll perform pieces o' music to 'em. So if we'm a bit late, we can turn in there."

On reaching the schoolroom, however, a friend who perceived their coming advanced with the news that he knew where there were some vacant places, and the three soon found themselves in a comfortable corner. Mrs. Belford, who was inclined to stoutness, untied her bonnet-strings and fanned herself with her handkerchief.

The worst of all these here tea-parties," she whispered to Keziah, "is that they allus hev' the rooms so warm. What wi' the sun, and the hot tea, and folks sittin' close together, it's like bein' in a hot-house."

In this opinion Mrs. Belford was not far from the truth. The schoolroom, an oblong-shaped building, was low in elevation and had a good deal of glass let into its roof, and as there were no blinds, the June sunlight poured in upon the participants in the

feast with almost equatorial power. The general atmosphere, indeed, was a mixture of heat, the odour of tea made in great urns, of hot toast, well-buttered, and of cold boiled ham. Ham, toast, and tea were the prevailing features of the tea-party—those who presented themselves paid a shilling and consumed as much ham, and ate as much toast or bread-and-butter, and drank as much tea as they desired. And if they were stout, like Mrs. Belford, the ham began to shine in their faces, and the hot tea to exude from their pores; the thin ones, like Belford and Keziah, however, ate and drank steadily and silently, and got their shilling's worth.

As if to encourage the flock to do their best with knife and fork, cup and platter, the ministers and great men in authority went about the schoolroom, in and out amongst the tables, giving a word there and a nod here, all with a sort of re-assuring assurance that to eat ham and drink tea on a boiling June afternoon was the most delightful thing in the world. Amongst this group was Mr. Linacre, who, catching sight of the Down-Town party, made his way to its corner and shook hands with each member.

"And how are we all?" he enquired. "This is a glorious day, on every account. Sister Belford, I trust you are enjoying yourself."

"Why, thankin' you, Mestur Linacre," replied Mrs. Belford, who was engaged on her second plate of ham, "I can't say as I'm not, sir. Of course, this here ham might ha' been boiled a trifle longer, and

one niver does expect nowt but stewed tea at a tea-party, but when all's taken into consideration I'm sure the ladies has done their best, and of course, if it's a trifle warm, why, one expects it at this time o' year."

Linacre produced a bundle of tickets from one of his capacious pockets. He laid a blue one before Belford, and two white ones before Mrs. Belford and Keziah.

"Brother Belford," he said, "you'll come on the platform, of course—you'll find that seat's on the right-hand side of the organ and a very good place. Those white tickets, ladies, will admit you to the front row of the gallery, just in front of the platform, where you'll be able to look right down upon the speakers. You'll have a treat to-night," he continued, bending down and whispering. "The missionary from China is a grand fellow, ladies—a true apostle!"

Then Mr. Linacre passed on to exchange a word or two with others of the flock, and Mrs. Belford, having remarked upon his affability, proceeded to finish her second plate and to request the favour of a third.

II

THE festivities, so far as the first sitting-down was concerned, being over, Belford and his two companions left the schoolroom for the open air, and proceeded to amuse themselves in various ways during the interval which must elapse between the tea-party and the missionary meeting. The farmer encountered a brother local preacher and went to smoke a pipe with him in a lane at the back of the schoolroom; Mrs. Belford seated herself on one of the old box-tombs in the disused chapel burial ground, and alternately mopped her brow and gazed at the attire of the ladies who passed in and out of the centre of festivity; Keziah wandered amongst the tombs and read the various inscriptions. Long before the time of the meeting, the two women had entered the chapel and taken their places in the front row of the gallery.

The chapel was an old-fashioned structure, built about the end of the eighteenth century on a purely utilitarian idea. It was four square, save for a recess at one end, wherein stood the organ. In front of the organ rose the pulpit; on the present occasion a platform had been built between pulpit and organ in

such a fashion that the former formed a convenient standpoint behind which the chairman's table could be placed, and from which each speaker could address the meeting. The ground floor of the chapel was filled with family pews, each carpeted and cushioned and furnished with footstools or hassocks, upholstered to match the carpet. Round three sides of the building ran a deep gallery; two sides of this were fitted with pews like those downstairs, similarly, but not quite so elaborately furnished; the third side, facing the pulpit, was occupied by benches arranged like the seats in the gallery of a theatre—this was where those people sat who had not the means to pay for a sitting in a pew. The colour of the place was uniformly cold; the walls were of a neutral grey, relieved by a stencilling of brown; the woodwork of a sober varnish; there was no hint of brightness in all the building save the somewhat garish blue and gold of the organ pipes and the red cushion with gilt tassels which ornamented the ledge of the pulpit.

To Mrs. Belford and Keziah this was a very grand place, and they sat with bated breath and staring eyes as they watched the chapel gradually fill. Townsfolk in their best, who had been much too grand to attend the tea-party, arrived and took their seats in the front pews; elderly gentlemen, very sombre of raiment and precise of countenance, took up positions in the front of the platform. Mrs. Belford, with great pride, saw her husband find his place in a

back seat of that same eminence, and notified Keziah of the fact; considering that he was thus elevated, and that she and Keziah had seats in the front row of the gallery, she felt that they were very distinguished persons indeed.

Before seven o'clock the body of the chapel and the three sides of the gallery had become filled; there was also no space left on the platform except in the immediate neighbourhood of the chairman's table. But although all the seats in the various pews were occupied, people still crowded into the building, and the men in authority began to fetch chairs from the adjacent houses in order to provide further sitting accommodation in the aisles. Keziah, watching these doings with the interest of the villager who rarely sees anything, suddenly became aware of a young woman who was steadily pushing her way forward along one of the aisles on the ground floor—a tall young woman, smartly dressed, who carried in her arms an infant dressed in white. Something in this young woman's figure and carriage reminded Keziah of her sister, and she bent forward over the front of the gallery and looked more closely at her, but as the object of her scrutiny was closely veiled and was also bending over the infant, it was impossible to see her face. Nevertheless she nudged Mrs. Belford and drew that worthy woman's attention to the young woman.

"Isn't yon young lady down theer—her wi' t' baby in her arms—summat like our Mia i' her walk and

ways?" she said. "Look—her wi' t' brown fall on, passin' by that pillar!"

Mrs. Belford looked in the direction indicated and nodded her head.

"Aye, she does hold herself summat as your Mia did," she replied, "but I don't think she's as tall as what Mia would be. Eh, it's a poor game to bring a babby in a missionary meetin'—it'll very like roar, and interrupt the China gentleman in his remarks."

"Why, i' that case they'll hev' to shift it," said Keziah. "To be sure it's t' only infant in t' place."

The young woman who bore the infant still pushed her way forward, until she had come to the very end of the aisle, where she stood looking about her as if undecided where to go. Close by one of the front pews was scarcely full; its chief occupant, a white-bearded old gentleman, rose and beckoned the stranger to enter. She accepted his invitation with a bow, and entering, sat down in the place he indicated, and settled the baby more comfortably in her arms. But she made no motion towards removing her veil, and as she kept her head bent over the child no one from the galleries could see much of her.

For some time the organist had been playing voluntaries and symphonies on his instrument, and Keziah, who rarely heard instrumental music save from the wheezy harmonium at Down-Town, felt as if she had been transported into some high and vast cathedral of the skies. She sat in a rapt attention, listening with all her ears, until she was brought

back to earth by the solemn entrance of the speakers, who, led by Mr. Linacre, filed on to the platform from a curtained-off stairway and disposed themselves about the table. There was a good deal of hand-clapping consequent upon their appearance, and many audible expressions of delight when it was seen that the missionary from China, in order to give an air of semblance to his speech, and to show the people how the Chinese really did array themselves, had attired himself in the garments of the country which he had lately left. Otherwise he was a somewhat commonplace looking little man with large spectacles and a shrewd air; both Mrs. Belford and Keziah agreed that Mestur Linacre looked much more noble in his raven-hued garb and spotless linen, when, having assumed the seat of authority, he rose again and announced that they would open the proceedings by singing a hymn. He was still more impressive when, the hymn having been sung, he invited the senior minister to lead the assembly in prayer, and his attitude and rapt attention during this sacred exercise was a model of behaviour. Equally majestic was his deportment when a moment later he rose from his chair, shot out his cuffs, and resting his knuckles on the table before him, took in the entire audience with a bland smile and proceeded to make his speech as chairman of the meeting.

"My friends!" began Mr. Linacre. "My Christian friends!"

There was a sudden movement in the front pew in

which the young woman and her baby had found a place. The young woman rose to her feet, and with a quick gesture threw back her thick veil. And Keziah, whose sharp eye had caught the movement, uttered a smothered sob and spoke one word aloud.

“Mia!”

Mia stood, unveiled at last, pale, defiant, staring up at Simon Linacre, who in his turn stared down at her with eyes which anger, fear, and terrible, because impotent rage, made horrible. The attention of the whole mass of people had become instantly concentrated on these two: throughout the chapel there was a dreadful silence.

Mia suddenly thrust the sleeping infant towards a man who, for lack of a seat, had planted himself on the communion rails at the foot of the platform.

“Here!” she said, in a clear voice that could be heard to the remotest corner of the chapel. “Hand this child up to Linacre there! It’s his and it’s mine, and as he won’t marry me, he can take it!”

The man, a big, simple fellow, took the child unwillingly, and holding it awkwardly in his arms, stared open-mouthed from Mia to Linacre, who stood motionless on the platform, his face white and beaded with perspiration, his lips parted. Those watching him closely saw him try to moisten his lips, saw him try to speak. But he remained dumb—still gazing at Mia with eyes which spoke unutterable things.

Mia suddenly laughed, and forced her way out of the pew, its horrified occupants gladly making room for her. And at the same moment Keziah rose and appealed to those about her.

"Let me get out, if you please," she said. "It's my sister, and I mun go to her."

There was such a silence in the path that Keziah's voice sounded quite clearly. It seemed to arouse Linacre, at whose sleeve the senior minister was tugging vainly. He made a perceptible effort, and spoke, and the words seemed to rattle dryly in his throat.

"The poor young woman seems to be ill," he said, as smoothly as he could. "Perhaps there's a doctor somewhere about—and I think that's her sister I see there in the gallery, and——"

Keziah, who had gained the top step of the stairs, suddenly flared up into one of her characteristic bursts of anger. She turned and confronted Linacre with blazing eyes.

"Yes, it is her sister as is here in the gallery and as is coming down to her, Mestur Linacre!" she shouted. "An' if you're the father o' that poor babby, her sister'll come for you, you see if she doesn't! This is where all the mystery's been, is it? Get out o' t' way, all you there!" she exclaimed, turning on the people who still crowded the gangways. "Can't you see I want to get downstairs, ye soft starin' good-for-nowts!"

She made her way through them with fist and el-

bow and reached the aisle, where Mia, defiant and vindictive, stood glaring at Linacre with the people about her wondering at her beauty. Keziah pulled her by the sleeve.

"Come away, Mia!" she said. "Come home, love, come home!"

At that instant the child, still awkwardly held in the man's arms, began to cry. Mia leapt upon it like a tigress.

"Give me my child!" she said, and dragged it from him. A softer look came over her face as she drew the baby to her bosom and began to hush it. She seemed to become unconscious of those around her.

Keziah pulled her sister by the sleeve once more.

"Come away home, Mia," she said. "Come—there's no good in stopping here." She glanced up at the platform and caught Belford's eye. "Mestur Belford!" she cried appealingly.

Belford, who, like all the rest of the men on the platform, was on his feet, immediately left his place. Linacre, too, muttered something, was also moving towards the entrance to the platform. But the senior minister, an old white-haired man, barred the way.

"Mr. Linacre," he said, amidst a dead silence, "this young woman has brought a terrible accusation against you in the presence of the congregation. Tell me in God's name, is it true or not?"

An awful spasm crossed Linacre's features; a variety of conflicting emotions and passions seemed

to be working within him. And in the moment that he stood irresolute, Mia suddenly held the child aloft in her arms, and burst into a wild fit of laughter.

"Look at your dadda!" she shrieked. "Look at your dadda!"

All the devilry of his nature suddenly flooded Linacre's face. He lifted his hands and shook them at the men who watched him.

"Curse you!" he said. "There isn't one of you that isn't as bad!"

Then, before they could stop him, he snatched up the Bible which he himself had presented to the chapel, tore it in halves with one great effort, and hurling the desecrated volume from him, rushed headlong from the platform, and away into the June twilight.

III

ONCE outside the chapel, Linacre walked quickly and steadily towards the stable-yard of the inn where it was his custom to put up his horse and trap when he drove into Normansholt. He was quite composed when he arrived there, and the stable-boy whom he rang for saw nothing unusual in his manner.

"Get my mare in at once," he said. "You needn't bring the trap round—I'm going out by the back way. Have it ready here in five minutes."

Then he went into the bar-parlour, where the landlord, who happened to be alone, showed much surprise at the sight of him.

"Hullo, Mestur Linacre!" he exclaimed. "Why, I thowt you were takin' the chair at this here missionary meetin' at t' chappil to-night?"

"I've just had a message requiring my presence at home," replied Linacre shortly. "I'll take a glass of whisky before setting out, if you please."

"No bad news, I hope?" said the landlord, helping him to a generous measure.

"I don't know till I get there," said Linacre.

"Then you'll not have heard this here gentleman from forrin' parts?" said the landlord. "I could like to ha' heard him myself, 'cause I'm allus inter-

ested in aught about them far-off places, but our missis and the gels wanted to go, and of course somebody's got to stop in. Howsomever, I lay they'll tell me all about it when they come home."

"Aye, they'll tell you all about it when they come home," said Linacre. He drank off his whisky and went out with a curt farewell, and the landlord looked after him wonderingly.

"Doesn't seem quite like hisself," he mused. "Hedn't so much o' that grand manner, nor so many o' them fine words as usual. Happen he has had bad news and doesn't like to say so—you never know."

Outside in the stable-yard Linacre climbed into his trap, threw the amount of the stabling-fee to the lad, and drove away by the back entrance. He wished to avoid observation, being in no mood to be stared at. But there was no way of leaving Normansholt, at any rate in his direction, without crossing the head of the broad Beast-Market, half-way down which the chapel stood. As he drove across it he saw that people were pouring out of the chapel in a steady stream, and that while groups were collecting in the thoroughfare in front of it, some of the younger generation were running hastily towards the town. Linacre judged from these evidences that the meeting had been brought to an end; he whipped up his horse, crossed the top of the Beast-Market and turning down a side street, made his way into the country in the direction of Yewford Grange.

It was still a fair summer evening, and in the after-

glow children were playing on the outskirts of the little town and outside the cottage gardens which grew fewer and wider apart as the towers and spires were left behind. Linacre looked at the children and at the cottages as if they were the phantasm of a dream. He had been taken so completely by surprise that he was still suffering from the shock of it, and could scarcely realize what had happened. Nothing in the whole course of his existence had ever occasioned him so much surprise as the sudden appearance of Mia at the missionary meeting. He had left her only a week before in the comfortable surroundings in which he had placed her when he took her away from Clothford, and she had then given him no hint and made no threat of doing what she had now done. He knew that she had constantly pressed him to marry her; he knew also that she had a temper and was apt to act on impulse; but that she should have resorted to a sudden step of this sort was more than he could understand, for he could not see what she was to gain by it, and like all men of his stamp, Linacre was unable to conceive of any human creature doing anything, undertaking anything, except with an ulterior motive. It was a mystery, he said to himself, as he drove along between the peaceful meadows and green corn-fields—a mystery.

Moreover, this sudden and unexplainable move on Mia's part had upset a certain plan which Linacre had been perfecting for some little time. He had grown weary of the solitary life at Yewford

Grange; even the weekly visit, the weekly feasting at Clothford failed, now that it was a thing of regularity and custom, to reconcile him to the greyness of his existence in the old farmstead. He had determined to get clear of it; to make arrangements about leaving his money-lending business in Mortimer's hands, and to go clean away where he was not known. He had ideas about living in Brighton, or in Bournemouth, but being as well off as he was, he said to himself, he would pick and choose. It was in his scheme to take Mia with him, but as for the child, it must be put out to nurse. He might want to move about, perhaps to travel, and a child would be in the way. As to marrying Mia, that was another matter—he would see how he felt inclined about that later on. At present, as he had often told her, she had everything that she wanted, and much more in the way of money and luxury than she could ever have expected to get. The recollection of that fact made him more surprised and puzzled than ever; what could have induced her to take the foolish step of denouncing him in public? In his opinion, it meant that she threw away everything for which he believed women to care—she would now have no more than the gown on her back.

The evening was just deepening to twilight when Linacre drove into the court-yard of his silent, ghostly looking house and called for the old manservant.

“Take the mare out, rub her down, and then give

her a good feed of corn," he commanded. "I shall want her again in two hours' time, so don't you go to bed."

Then he strode into the house. His aunt's chair stood empty by the fireside; she, he knew, would have been in bed a good hour or more. The grim-faced woman servant sat knitting near the hearth; according to usage she gave him no greeting, nor did he greet her. He bade her bring him some water to his own sitting room and passed in there. After the woman had obeyed his instructions, he locked the door, mixed himself a strong glass of spirits, lighted a cigar, and taking off his coat, set to work in consulting and sorting papers which he took from his desk and his safe. Being of methodical habits, and having contemplated for some time the step which he was now taking, there was no great press of matter, and within an hour he had put all his affairs in order, so far as the farm was concerned. A considerable mass of papers he destroyed and burnt in the empty grate; such as were really necessary he made into packages and deposited in a bag which was furnished with a patent lock. And that done, he locked up the safe and the desk, now empty of anything important, and hung the keys on a nail above the mantelpiece.

Linacre's sleeping chamber opened out of the sitting room which he had always reserved strictly for himself. He now entered it and changed his clerical-looking clothes of sable hue for a grey tweed

suit, fashionably cut and almost new. Dragging two substantial portmanteaux to the middle of the floor, he filled one with more new clothes, which he took from a locked press; the other he filled with linen, underclothing, and toilet necessities. There were new overcoats, too, in the press; he selected two of them, found a travelling rug and a couple of umbrellas, and going back to the kitchen, bade the old man re-yoke the mare. Then he dragged the portmanteaux into the sitting room, and mixing himself another glass of spirits, sat down and looked about him, knowing in his own mind that he never meant to enter that room again.

"The mare's ready, maister," said the old man, looking in at the door and glaring cunningly at the portmanteaux.

"Who's holding her?" asked Linacre.

"Thomson' lad—he come round as I were yokin' her," answered the old man.

"Give me a hand with this luggage, then," said Linacre.

They made two journeys to and from the trap, which now stood in the courtyard with its lamps lighted; then Linacre went back alone and picked up his small bag and the overcoats, rug, and umbrellas. For the first time for many a long year he went out, leaving the door not only unlocked, but open.

He put the last of the things in the trap, motioned the old man to follow him, led the way back into the

kitchen, and beckoning the woman to join them, laid a handful of gold on the table.

"I may be away for a few days," he said. "There's the week's wages."

Then he left them without as much as a good-night, and going out into the darkness, climbed into the trap and drove away.

IV

LINACRE drove steadily through the night, keeping an easy, uniform pace. His mare was good and well-bred, and equal to the forty-odd mile journey before her. He had caused a feed of corn to be placed in the trap, and long before the dawn came he pulled the mare up in the shelter of a deep wood, threw a rug over her and fed her, while he himself took a pull at his flask and lighted a cigar. Under the dawn he drove gently along through the waking villages; the very early risers, coming to the doors of their cottages, stared in surprise to see such a well-appointed conveyance go by at so early an hour.

It was barely six o'clock in the morning when Linacre arrived at a roadside inn three miles outside the boundaries of Clothford. It was a large place, standing on an important highway, and there were already many light carts, traps, and drags gathered about the space in front of it. Linacre beckoned a lad to hold his mare, and going within the house, found the landlord and asked for breakfast. As luck would have it, the landlady was then making their own; finding that he could be accommodated Linacre had his mare taken out of the trap and put up for an hour or two's rest; he had ideas of his own concerning her future, and did not wish to take her

into Clothford in a tired condition. Therefore he decided to take his time over his breakfast, and while it was being prepared, he sat down in the parlour window, looking out upon the busy scene outside the inn.

A boy carrying newspapers in a canvas bag, slung over his shoulders, came scurrying along the road on a bicycle. He dismounted, selected a paper, threw it through the open window into the bar, mounted and was off again at top speed. The landlord picked up the paper, and leaning out of the half door of the bar, offered it to Linacre.

"No time for reading myself yet, sir," he said; "perhaps you'd like a look at the news?"

Linacre took the paper with a mechanical expression of thanks, and turned its pages over just as mechanically. He was thinking of other things than newspapers, yet things which sometimes get into newspapers, and—his eye suddenly caught sight of his own name. Then of certain, big, black letters above it. *Dramatic Incident at a Missionary Meeting: Serious Charge Against a Well-known Layman.*

Linacre folded the paper in his hands and read. It was all there, and told in heightened and telling fashion. And it was evident that all Normansholt had been stirred to the depths by the news, and that the supper-tables of the little town had had food for gossip and to spare, after his hurried departure of the previous evening. The returned missionary from China had enjoyed no opportunity of relating his

stories of idolatry and torture—Mia's sudden appearance on the scene had proved an anti-climax.

Linacre read the whole account with a feeling of grim amusement. The writer had been careful to keep within the law in speaking of him, but he had unloosed himself in narrating Linacre's career in the denomination, for there could be no doubt about the facts there. He had been a member of society so long; a local preacher of so many years; he had been a circuit steward since such a date, and was now senior steward; he was noted for his piety and benefactions; the very Bible which he had so dramatically torn up had been presented to the Normansholt Chapel by him; the very pulpit on whose desk it stood had been his latest gift; his name and fame had gone abroad far, and——

"And I hope your mornin' drive's given you a good appetite for your breakfast, sir," said the landlady, setting a smoking dish of eggs and bacon on the table, and flanking it with hot coffee and toast. "There's naught like being up early in a morning for that!"

There was nothing wrong with Linacre's appetite; he ate and drank after his usual hearty fashion, took a dram with the landlord after breakfast was over, and lighted a cigar, while the mare was put in the trap once more. He was apparently in no haste to depart, but he took care to be off in good time to arrive in Clothford before the first train from Normansholt arrived there, for a good many business

men came to the city from the small country town, and Linacre had no desire to encounter any of them.

It was nearly eight o'clock when he finally drove into Clothford, and taking his luggage and his belongings to the Midland Station, placed them in the cloak-room. Then he proceeded to a horse depositary some little distance away, and driving into the yard got down from the trap, and went into the proprietor's office. The proprietor, who knew him well, presently came out into the yard with him, and looked mare and trap over knowingly.

"There'll be no difficulty about that, Mr. Linacre," he said. "I know the very man who'll buy. And if it comes to that I'll buy myself, and then you can have done with the matter. I know the mare and the dog-cart, too."

"How much?" said Linacre.

"One hundred and twenty, cash," replied the proprietor. "Harness in, of course."

Linacre considered matters a moment.

"All right," he said.

"Come inside and I'll write you a cheque," said the purchaser. He led the way into the office and unlocked a drawer. "Sit down, Mr. Linacre," he said, pointing to a chair. "There's the newspaper if you'd like to see it."

He pointed to a newspaper lying on a side table. Linacre saw that it had not been opened.

"No, thank you," he said. "I've seen it." Then he added, to himself, "but you haven't."

With the cheque in his pocket-book, Linacre went away from the depository. It was characteristic of him that having said good-morning to the proprietor, he walked out of the yard without so much as a glance at the mare. He had always been very proud of her—but he had done with her now. When he got wherever he was going, he could buy another just as good, if not better. He could find another Mia Lambert, too, for the matter of that, and with as little trouble as he could purchase the best horse-flesh.

Linacre was now on his way to Mortimer's office, or, rather to his own office. It was situate in a very quiet and respectable street near the City Hall, a street given up to solicitors and barristers and insurance agencies and investment businesses, and accordingly wore an air of great solidity and of assurance of good things. Linacre approached it by other similarly quiet streets; he knew most of the men who came into the city from Normansholt, and where they had their offices and warehouses, and he avoided the quarter in which they were situate. And at ten minutes past nine he walked into the house in which he operated under Mortimer's name, and ascended to the offices on the first floor. Now, there was no necessity to keep any considerable clerical staff at these offices, and it consisted of no more than Mortimer himself, a clerk—little more than a boy—who did typewriting and odd clerical jobs, and an office-boy, who answered the door, copied letters, and made himself useful. These two young gentle-

men were leaning against the wall when Linacre appeared, exchanging views on cricket. And not knowing anything about Linacre except that he was a very, very rare visitor to the office—for he never went there more than twice or thrice a year—they regarded him with perfect equanimity and did not move.

“Mr. Mortimer not here yet?” enquired Linacre.

“Not yet, sir,” replied the clerk.

“I thought he came at nine o’clock,” said Linacre.

“Usually,” said the clerk. “But it’s only ten past now.”

Linacre leaned over the rails and looked down the stairs. A quarter of an hour went by—Mr. Mortimer did not appear. Linacre went down to the street door—went round the corner to a quiet hostelry with which he was acquainted—stayed there ten minutes—went back to the offices. The clerk and the boy still hung about, but there was no sign of Mortimer. And the clerk remarked that during Mr. Linacre’s absence three or four other callers had been and gone away, saying they could not wait and would call later on.

“I suppose Mr. Mortimer was here yesterday?” enquired Linacre.

The clerk replied that yesterday had been early closing day in Clothford, and that Mr. Mortimer had been there until noon, when they all left—after the usual custom.

“Did he seem quite well?” asked Linacre.

Now that the clerk came to think of it, he was not quite sure that Mr. Mortimer had looked quite well; in fact, he believed he didn't. The office-boy thereupon volunteered the information that Mr. Mortimer looked as if he had a headache, and had sent him, the office-boy, out for a cup of tea at eleven o'clock.

"Then he mayn't be well," said Mr. Linacre. "I suppose you know where he lives?"

But neither of them did, and Linacre knew very well they did not, for Mortimer's private address had always been kept secret.

"Well, I do," observed Linacre. "I'm an old friend of his, and as I want to see him particularly, I'll just run around and find out if he's in or out, or where he is. You can stop here if you like, or go away and call later on. I should call later on—I should think he's not well."

They all went downstairs together, and Linacre, walking as far as the first cab-stand, hailed a hansom and bade the man take him quickly to Mortimer's address. So far he had no suspicions of evil, but he knew Mortimer to be an extremely punctilious man as regards the keeping of times and hours, and he felt sure that it must be something out of the common that made him late at the office that morning. He might be ill; Rachel might be ill. The latter contingency, however, was not one that was likely to keep Mortimer away from business.

Linacre left his cab at the street corner, and walk-

ing up to the house, admitted himself with the latch-key which he always carried. He slammed the door loudly; the noise brought Rachel out of the parlour at the rear of the hall. She stared at him in silence.

"Where's Mortimer?" he asked without preface.

Rachel shook her head, still staring intently at him.

"Don't know," he said, interpreting the motion. "Confound it, why don't you speak? You must know."

"I don't," she answered. "I think he's gone away."

"Gone—where, hang you?" snapped Linacre. "And when?"

Rachel put her hand to her forehead, and seemed to be thinking. "I think it was yesterday," she said at last. "He packed his portmanteau and took it away in a cab. Yes, it was yesterday—and just after breakfast. He has not been back."

"Damn it, didn't he say anything about where he was going?" exclaimed Linacre.

She shook her head, and it was evident that Mortimer had either said nothing to her, or that she had completely forgotten whatever he had said. Linacre flung away from her with an impatient exclamation, and hurriedly inspected Mortimer's room, and the desk in the dining room in which papers were sometimes kept. But there was no clue as to the man's whereabouts, and nothing of any interest came to light.

Linacre went into the back parlour again and found Rachel standing there with one hand resting on a newspaper, which lay spread out on the table. She still stared at him intently.

"So it was you," she said suddenly.

"You—what?" growled Linacre.

She tapped the paper with her finger, and Linacre, glancing at the column thus indicated, saw that she was pointing out the account of the affair at Normansholt.

"You, who took the girl away from here!" she continued. "Sometimes I hoped it wasn't."

Linacre blazed into a sudden fury, and snatching up the paper, crumpled it into a ball and flung it on the fire.

"You hell-cat!" he burst out. "Mind your own business and keep your tongue still, or I'll give you more than you'll like. Get my room ready and cook some dinner—I shall stay here to-night."

Leaving the house, Linacre hastened to the nearest cab-stand and was speedily driven back to the office. There he found the clerk and the boy hanging about the doorway. He beckoned the clerk aside.

"Now, there's no use beating about the bush," he said, in his masterful fashion. "The real truth is that though you see me here so seldom, I'm the real proprietor of this business, and Mortimer was only the manager. I can't find Mortimer, and I'm afraid there's something wrong. Send that boy away—tell

him that Mortimer's ill and there'll be no business to-day, and then do you come upstairs to me."

When the much-astonished clerk had dismissed the non-unwilling office-boy, he ran up the stairs to find Mr. Linacre already in the offices—Linacre, in fact, carried a set of keys which gave him admission to everything.

"Shut and fasten that door," he said. "Stay—write out a notice and paste it up outside, saying that owing to illness no business will be done to-day. I want to look round."

Then he began a systematic examination of everything he could lay hands on in the manager's private desk and in the safe. And at the end of the morning's work, sending the clerk away and telling him to attend next morning, Linacre set out to visit bankers, stockbrokers and solicitors, and he was full of fear.

Before three o'clock he knew, if not the worst, at least all that was bad enough. Mr. James Mortimer had fleeced him—skinned him nearly bare. He had steadily got in all that he could; he had called in moneys that were out on loan; he had possessed himself of the bank balance; he had even dealt with Linacre's real property, and all in such a clever fashion that only one thing was certain—he and the money were gone. And though Linacre held a long and serious consultation with the police, there was a conviction in his heart as he left them that the bulk of his riches was vanished for ever.

V

LINACRE went back to the house marvelling at Mortimer's cleverness—or, rather, that it had proved itself of a greater quality than he had supposed it to be. He had always known Mortimer to be a man of great gifts, smart, astute, resourceful, but he had never believed him to be clever enough to deceive or circumvent him, Simon Linacre. There were, in fact, two reasons why he had always felt safe about Mortimer. One was, that he himself had kept a sharp eye on things by means of the weekly visit. Everything had passed under his eyes at those visits; he had prided himself that he knew and understood every detail of the business. It was now only four days since the last of these visits, and everything had then seemed straight and in order. Clever, he said to himself, very clever of Mr. James Mortimer!

The other reason why Linacre believed he had his manager as safe as if he were chained to the office desk was of a different nature. Linacre was in possession of a certain secret appertaining to Mr. Mortimer's early career—a secret which, if divulged to the police, would inevitably have resulted in the manager's ultimate removal to Portland or Dartmoor. He had believed that this gave him a hold on

the man which would make him his slave for life, and that a mere word from him would be law to Mortimer for ever. But now that Mortimer had outwitted him and disappeared, Linacre began to see a few things which he had not seen before. He realized on his way to the police that unless he was very prudent some awkward complications might arise. First of all, Mortimer was not the man's real name, but only one of the two or three aliases. Then he was not sure that if the entire truth came out he might not be charged with being accessory to Mortimer's crime—he had helped him to conceal it, at any rate, and he did not know what amount of turpitude attached to that fact. The worst of it was that if Mortimer did fall into the hands of the law, and being cornered made a clean breast of everything, he would be able to put him, Linacre, in a very tight and nasty corner. Accordingly, he did no more with the police than to give them a description of the missing man, against whom he made no allegation, but instead held out the idea that he might have met with foul play or be suffering from temporary loss of memory. He had previously begged the people whom he had seen at the bank, the solicitors, and the stockbrokers, to keep their lips tightly closed until he gave them word—he knew very well that if he could only lay hands on Mortimer, come face to face with him within four walls, he could make him disgorge. But having proved himself as clever as he was, he doubted if Mortimer or the money would

ever be seen again. It was the end, no doubt, of a deeply laid scheme, and Linacre cursed himself that he had not safeguarded his affairs in better fashion.

Linacre went back to the house in which Mortimer had acted as warming-pan, and found that Rachel had made all preparations for his comfort. She had taken more than usual pains with the dinner—everything that Linacre fancied at that season of the year was there in perfection. He ate and drank with enjoyment, bad as things were; had the circumstances been of a happier nature he would have feasted in the swinish fashion which seemed natural to him. But he missed Mortimer; there was no one on whom to exercise his coarse wit; no one who would laugh at his coarse jokes; no one with whom to drink. He sat by himself and drank by himself, and drank heavily. From the time of his returning to the house until she had removed the last of the dishes from the table, he said no word to Rachel Weare nor took any notice of her—if he had, he would have seen that the woman's eyes were unnaturally bright, that her face was unusually pale, and that she betrayed an air of excitement which was wholly foreign to her. And if he had followed her into the kitchen, he would have seen that ever and anon between her goings to and from the dining room, she went to a side-table on which lay the morning newspaper, and read once more with staring eyes the account of what had taken place at Normansholt the night before.

Simon Linacre, for his part, had already forgotten that incident—it had been blotted out by the greater catastrophe of his monetary loss. He sat in loneliness, trying to estimate the amount of which Mortimer had robbed him. It was a large sum; a very large sum. It left him with nothing but what his farm stock, live and dead, would fetch; what the furniture in the house in which he sat would fetch; and the cheque for the horse and trap which lay in his pocket-book. He could certainly go on farming again, but he reflected that the neighbours of Yewford and Normansholt would not now be congenial to him. And he cursed Mortimer from his head to his heel, but he cursed himself much more.

He was such a heavy and accustomed drinker, that the deep potations which he took that night, on which he sat up to a late hour, seemed to affect him in no way. But at last he grew sleepy, and climbed the stairs to his room, and throwing himself on the bed half-undressed fell instantly into a sleep that was more than half a stupor. The liquor which clouded his brain made him dream—he dreamt of black clouds, of black shapes, of black hands, sinewy and cruel, clutching at his throat, choking the life out of him—even the consciousness of the dream seemed to pass away from him in one great surging wave, which changed from black to vivid crimson, and from crimson to black again, and vanished in a flash of blinding light. . . .

“It’s a queer thing,” said the milkman who called

at the house the following evening, and subsequently approached the policeman at the corner of the street, "I can't make anybody hear at Mortimer's there and I couldn't this morning. I left the milk on the doorstep then, and it's there now. The housekeeper was there last night, just as usual, and I've never known her to be away. And the blinds are up and you can look in, but there's naught to be seen either front or back, except that there dog of theirs is somewhere in the kitchen or the basement howlin' his soul out. It strikes me there's something wrong."

VI

IN THE confusion which resulted upon Linacre's sudden departure from the platform, Keziah got her sister out of the chapel by a side-door, and escorted by Belford and his wife, who had by that time made their way downstairs, took her into the caretaker's house, the door of which was immediately closed against the fussy and the curious. It was but a few minutes since the outbreak of the awful tornado of human panic; to Keziah it seemed as if she had lived through a lifetime in those terrible moments in which Mia and Linacre had confronted each other. She leaned against a dresser, panting for breath and staring at her sister, at whom Belford, his wife, and the caretaker's wife were also gazing with eyes in which wonder, pity, and amazement were all blended. As for Mia she was the most unconcerned of the company; she had dropped into an easy chair and was quietening the baby, which had begun to whimper. Keziah noticed how well and expensively she was dressed; she saw, too, how the girl's beauty had received some new enrichment; she was not slow either, to see the smouldering and sullen fires of anger and resentment in her eyes and the vindictive lines about her mouth.

"Mia!" she suddenly exclaimed. "Was all that

there true what you said i' th' chappil about Linacre? Before God, now, Mia?"

"Of course it was all true!" retorted Mia. "What use would it have been my saying it, if it hadn't been true?"

"Were it him as took you away from your place?" asked Keziah. "That there Christmas time?"

Mia laughed. The sound of that laugh made the women shiver.

"What do you suppose he ever got me to Clothford for?" she said. "I'd a pretty good idea, myself, before I went. Who do you suppose it was I used to meet when I went out? Him, of course. Only I was soft enough to believe him."

"Then you did go away wi' him, Mia?" asked Keziah.

Mia nodded without replying in words.

"Mia, wheer ha' you been livin'?" Keziah demanded. "Come, now, Mia, tell me!"

"He'd taken a house at Etterford," answered Mia. "A nice little house it was, too, and beautifully furnished, and I'd a servant, and everything I wanted. And he was always saying we'd be married—only we never were. And——"

She stopped at that, and began folding and unfolding the hem of the baby's gown with trembling fingers. The others watched her curiously.

"What did you come away for, Mia?" asked her sister. "After all that time, and—and the baby——"

Mia looked up with a sudden flash of her eyes and

then looked down again. A dull red spread over her face and neck.

"Because I found he was carrying on with the servant-girl," she said in a low, suppressed voice. "I nearly killed her this morning," she added. "Perhaps I did—I don't know. I spoilt her beauty for her, anyway."

Keziah looked at the Belfords. Belford himself presented the appearance of a man in a dream; he was pulling unconsciously at his thin, unkempt beard and gazing at Mia as if she were some unreal thing. He had cherished a firm belief in Linacre; had, in fact, made a minor deity of him, and he felt the world to be falling about his ears when he found his idol to be more than three parts clay.

"Friends!" said Keziah appealingly, "what's to be done?"

Mrs. Belford spoke.

"Done?" she said. "Why, of course, you must take Mia home, Keziah, and Michael must be spoken to. Mestur Linacre must be taught his lesson, and it'll take a man to teach him it."

"Will you come home wi' me, Mia?" said Keziah. "You know your poor mother's dead, I expect?"

As she said this Keziah remembered the terrible secret; its memory flashed across her like the stab of a sudden, biting pain. She gazed at Mia fearfully as if she might see in her face some sign, some trace of the secret. And in a vague, indefinite fashion she wondered if all this trouble was part of some hered-

itary taint that was working itself like a canker through bodies and souls—and yet there lay the child, sweet and innocent as an infant Christ on His mother's lap!

Keziah suddenly snatched the baby out of Mia's arms and kissed it warmly.

"Eh, but it's a bonny bairn!" she said, hugging it. "See you, Mrs. Belford, it's fair like our Mia when she were a babby!"

Mia began to weep. She dropped her head on the table and cried bitterly. And the elder women nodded their bonnets at each other and motioned Keziah to let her have her cry out. As for Belford, he stole gently out of the house and blew his nose at the door.

"Lord have mercy upon us, miserable sinners!" he said to himself. "Eh dear!—eh dear!—eh dear!"

Mia cried her cry out, and at last looked up and held out her arms for the baby.

"I'll go home with you, Keziah, if you'll let me," she said, with a humility that sounded in odd contrast to her previous note of defiance. "I never thought to bring shame on you and Michael. But I've been both bad and foolish, and I'm well served."

At Belford's suggestion Keziah took Mia and the baby home in a cab, Belford and his wife driving on in front to warn Michael of his younger sister's return. Michael chanced to be in the cottage when they arrived; he received the news with amazement that

quickly changed into terrible anger against Linacre. But there was no anger apparent in him when the cab arrived; he helped Mia out of it as tenderly as if she had been an invalid, and when she had entered the cottage, kissed her gently and patted her on the shoulders reassuringly.

"Never mind aught now, Mia, my lass!" he said. "You're safe home again, now, and here you'll bide."

The Belfords were not people to talk, and as the arrival of the cab had been carefully timed for that hour of the evening when most of the Down-Towners had gone to bed, Mia's return passed unnoticed for that night. Neither Keziah nor Michael troubled her with much talk; both watched her with anxious eyes as she sat nursing the child; each tried in their separate ways to make her feel that she was not only welcome, but at home. She made little reply to anything that was said to her, but Keziah, who watched her narrowly, saw that the hard expression which had been on her face in the terrible scene in the chapel, and had frightened everybody who had seen it, was gradually dying away and being replaced by something softer. She rose at last and said she would go to bed, and bent down and kissed her brother, and then with a sudden impulse held the child to him. Michael, who was soft-hearted, kissed it with something very like a sob, and when the two women had gone up the stairs together, went out into the garden and shed a few tears, he was not

quite sure why. He walked up and down the road in the darkness, sorrowful, angry, wondering. There was a good deal of native pride in him, and the thought of shame was bitter.

Sounds of hilarity came from Hosea Yardsworth's cottage. Michael drew near, and going up to the window looked in through a rent of the dilapidated piece of sacking which did duty for a blind. The living-place was little better than a dog-kennel. There was a rickety old table in the middle of the stone-flagged floor; on it at that moment stood a bottle of gin, a jug of water, and a guttering candle in a dirty stick. In the one chair of the establishment sat Hosea, smoking a long pipe; on a log of wood, his back and shoulders propped against the wall of the fireplace, sat Reuben Gaunt, also smoking, or, rather, sucking at a pipe which had gone out; each man had a glass in his hand or within reach, each was listening with tipsy gravity to a song which Tin Tom, enthroned upon an upturned bucket, was trol-ling forth unmelodiously with many contortions of body and grimacings of countenance. At the end of each verse the hearers burst into loud applause and laughter, and drank, waving their glasses to the singer who in turn drank and waved his own.

Michael thought of the child whose soft face he had just kissed, and turned away sick at heart. For that child might have been Reuben's, and Reuben might have been leading a clean, sober, and godly life.

Outside his own cottage a shape came out of the gloom and into the gleam of the lamp which threw a shaft of light across the garden. Michael recognized Mrs. Gouldsbury. And it was suddenly revealed to him that here was somebody to whom he could tell all his trouble.

"I wanted to see Keziah a moment," said the dressmaker. "She was to bring me a piece of stuff from Normansholt. Is she in, Michael?"

"Aye, ma'am, she's in," answered Michael. "She's in," answered Michael. "She's——" he hesitated a moment, and then went on in a lower voice—"she's upstairs, ma'am, with Mia."

"With Mia!"

"Mia's come back, Mrs. Gouldsbury. An'—an' there's a little 'un with her."

"Michael!"

"That's what it is," he said. He remained silent for a while, pacing up and down the dark road, the dressmaker at his side. "I never thought to see shame brought on our family," he went on at last, "an' I'm thankful now that my father and mother are dead—specially my father; he thought that much o' Mia! Not that I blame the poor lass—she's been deceived cruel, Mrs. Gouldsbury."

"Then—then she wasn't married, after all?" exclaimed the dressmaker.

"Not from what she says," replied Michael.

Standing there in the road he told her the events of the evening. And as he came to an end Keziah

appeared at the door of the cottage and softly called her brother's name. Michael took Mrs. Gouldsbury inside; her face told Keziah that Michael had already given her the news.

"She's asleep now—tired out—and the little 'un, too," said Keziah. "Mrs. Gouldsbury, what ought to be done?"

"The man ought to be seen," said Mrs. Gouldsbury with decision. "He is well to do, and he must at any rate make proper provision for her and the child."

Michael shook his head.

"We want none of his money," he said between his teeth.

"But the child, Michael," argued the dressmaker. "There's its future to consider. The man must be seen——"

"I'll see him," said Michael, clenching his fists. "I mean to see him in the morning. I'm just going to step along and ask the master to give me a day off to-morrow, and I'll be away to Yewford as soon as it's light. Oh, I'll see him, right enough."

Mrs. Gouldsbury and Keziah exchanged glances. They understood each other.

"Let me go with you, Michael," said the dressmaker. "Keziah mustn't leave her sister, and you mustn't go alone. Borrow Mr. Belford's trap, and drive me over."

Michael had great faith in Mrs. Gouldsbury; he immediately assented to this proposal and went

across the road to make the necessary arrangements. Belford readily consented to lend his horse and trap and promised to have both ready at breakfast time.

"But, Michael, my lad," he said, accompanying the young man to the garden gate, "Michael, my lad, I misdoubt that you'll find Linacre there. After what occurred to-night at Normansholt yonder he'll not stay in these parts."

"I'll find him if he's gone to t' North Pole!" said Michael, with a vehement ring in his usually calm voice. "I've gotten to find him!"

"Well, if he's not at home ye might come across word on him at Mestur Mortimer's in Clothford," said Belford. "He were a partiklar friend o' that gentleman's, as I'm well aware, and accordin' to a remark 'at poor Mia let fall i' the caretaker's house at Normansholt to-night, he used to visit there regular, every week. Of course, you know the directions?"

"I know the directions," answered Michael. "But wherever he is I shall find him, Mestur Belford."

But Michael was not to find Linacre at the Grange. He might have been there for aught that he or Mrs. Gouldsbury could hear to the contrary, but neither the grim-faced housekeeper nor the surly old man-servant would tell them anything, beyond the fact that their master was not at home. And when Michael, losing his temper, announced his intention of getting out of the trap and searching the

house for himself, the old man skipped back into the kitchen and, returning with a gun, swore that he would shoot him dead if he offered to cross the threshold. Mrs. Gouldsbury persuaded Michael to drive away; he did so, threatening to come back with the police. But as they turned out of the lane which led to the Grange a lad, whom they had noticed hanging about the courtyard, burst, breathless, out of the bushes at the roadside and held up his hand. He was a sharp-eyed, ferrety-looking youngster, and had an atmosphere of greedy hunger about him.

"Ye want to know about Linacre, don't yer?" he asked, when he had recovered the breath which he had lost in dashing across the fields in order to cut the trap off.

"Well?" said Michael, glancing angrily at him.

"I can say summat about Linacre," answered the lad. "How much will yer gi' us?"

Michael produced half-a-crown from his pocket and held it up.

"I'll gi' you this if you'll tell the truth," he said. "But if I find out 'at you deceive me, I'll come back and gi' you such a beltin' as you'll none forget—there!"

"I'll tell t' truth, maister," said the lad. "Linacre come home last night and t'owd man put his mare up for a couple o' hour. I know, 'cause I were hangin' about t' stables. When t' two hour were up t'owd man put t' mare in agen, and I held her. Then Lin-

acre and t'owd man put two gre't pockmantles i' t' trap, an' some other things, and Linacre drave away."

"Away where?" asked Michael.

"He tewk t' turnpike road out yonder," the lad replied. "T' road as leads by Saxonsbridge to Clothford. I know, 'cause I followed him up t' village to see wheer he were goin'."

Michael dropped the coin into the lad's hand and drove on. But he drew rein again and looked back.

"What time were that?" he asked.

"Hafe-past ten or nearer eleven," answered the lad.

Michael considered matters. Belford's pony was not equal to a journey to Clothford nor even to Saxonsbridge. He accordingly drove into Normansholt, put up his equipage at an inn, and after he and Mrs. Gouldsbury had refreshed themselves at an eating-house, set out with her to Clothford. Now that he was on the track he meant to find Linacre and have matters out with him.

There were few trains to Clothford from Normansholt in the afternoons, and such as there were stopped at every station; it was therefore late when Mrs. Gouldsbury and Michael reached the city, and already early evening when they approached Mortimer's house. It was at that moment that the milkman was conveying his impressions to the policeman. The latter, seeing Michael about to ring the bell, advanced to him.

"I don't think you'll find anybody in there," he said. "The milkman here says he can't make anybody hear."

"And as I've been saying to the officer," said the milkman, "it's my impression there's something wrong in that house. Nobody's fetched in the milk I left this morning, and there's a dog howling pitiful in the basement. And if I don't know that house, I don't know who does!—I've served 'em with milk for six years and more, and I never knew the house-keeper to stir out. You don't happen to be her sister, now, do you, ma'am?" he concluded, staring hard at Mrs. Gouldsbury.

"Her sister!" exclaimed Mrs. Gouldsbury. "Why?"

"'Cause you're uncommon like her, that's all, ma'am," replied the milkman. "'Ceptin' that she's got a scar on her face. Well——"

The policeman at this juncture observed that his sergeant was just coming round the corner with the inspector, and that he would mention the matter to them. Michael and Mrs. Gouldsbury waited; the milkman also lingered, sure of being rewarded for his pains.

"There's always something wrong in a house when a dog howls, same as what that there dog's howling," he observed. "Dogs doesn't howl for naught."

"No," said Michael. "No—that's right. Not but

what that's a thing that not so many folks is aware of."

"I used to know a lot about dogs," said the milkman. "I was brought up on a farm amongst cattle and sheep and dogs. That there dog in there's frightened, that's what he is."

The inspector, coming along with the sergeant and the constable, seemed disposed to make light of the matter. In all probability, he said, the people of the house had gone away for the day. But the milkman stoutly protested that he had been on that round between six and seven years, and had never known the housekeeper to be away at any time. Whereupon the inspector consented to take a look round the back of the house and to peep in at windows and to generally examine the exterior of the suspected dwelling.

There was a small garden at the rear, enclosed by a high wall which in its turn was surrounded by wooden palisading. Over wall and palisading wistaria, jessamine, and honeysuckle grew; on the square bit of turf in the middle there was a rustic table and a rustic bench. A small conservatory opened upon this—and, trying the door, the sergeant discovered that it was open.

"In that case we'll just step inside," said the inspector. "Here, Brown, find out where that dog is and let it out."

The constable, who seemed to care little about the task, listened a moment, located the sounds as com-

ing from below, and gingerly descending the stairs opened a door at their foot and released a small spaniel, which, uttering an unearthly yelp, rushed past him, through the back hall and the conservatory, and into the garden and so to the street. The men looked at each other. The milkman, catching Michael's eye, shook his head.

"Well, all seems right downstairs," said the inspector, after looking into the front and back rooms. "Just go up, Brown, and see if all's right there."

The constable was less inclined to ascend than he had been to descend, but he mounted the staircase with a show of valour and opening the door of the front bedroom, popped his head in and looked round. The next moment he came down the stairs, white and trembling.

"There's a man and a woman lying on the bed in that room, sir," he said in a hushed whisper. "They look to me to be dead."

With a smothered exclamation the inspector pushed past the constable and made for the open door—the rest followed with palpitating hearts. In silence they crowded into the room, gazing fearfully at what they saw.

It was still early evening, and the sun, shining out of a cloudless and brilliant sky, lit up the room with a strong radiance tempered only by the light blinds and curtains which were drawn over the windows. Here and there a shaft pierced through—one fell across Linacre, who lay as if asleep. There was a

slight frown upon his brow, a frown of perplexity and wonder; it seemed as if he had died in the act of trying to solve some difficult problem.

The same shaft of light crossed the head of the woman, who had fallen, half-lying, half-crouching, across the dead man, and who was as dead as he was. There was a phial clasped tightly in one hand; the other clasped Linacre's hand.

"Do you two know these people?" asked the inspector in a hushed whisper as he turned to Mrs. Gouldsbury and Michael.

"That's Mestur Linacre of Yewford Grange," whispered Michael. "I know him—yes, I know him."

Mrs. Gouldsbury laid her hand on the dead woman's hair.

"This is my sister," she said. "I know her though I haven't seen her for nearly twenty years. She left home—we never knew where she went to—and now——"

Now, she reflected, her sister had gone and taken her secrets with her.

VII

THE story of these final happenings, as set forth in the county and local newspapers, naturally provided many subjects of conversation and speculation all over the country-side, and nowhere more so than in Down-Town, whose inhabitants felt that they had a certain assured proprietorship in the matter. As most of them could not read, they were dependent on those who could for details of Linacre's death and last end, and as the descriptions were passed from one to the other, they gained in strength and effect. At cottage doors and by cottage fires the women talked of nothing else; the kitchen of the Plough and Harrow knew but one subject for at least a week. Hosea Yardsworth was, of course, the prime authority on it; he it was who read out the news, commented upon it, and gave his opinion; his fellow Down-Towners, awe-stricken by his superior knowledge and education, were content to take his word as law.

"There's no doubt about it, gentlemen," said Hosea, having read the latest news of the Clothford Mystery to a select assemblage at the Plough and Harrow; "there's no doubt about it that what occurred is this here. This woman, identified by Mrs.

Gouldsbury as a sister as she had missed for a many years, appears to have cherished some enmity against Linacre and to have poisoned him. After which, for reasons which does not appear on the evidence, she poisoned herself. According to what the medical men says, that there poison must have been instantaneous—that's to say they'd die as quick as what a dog would if you put a bullet through its brain."

"Straight off, like," said the gamekeeper.

"Straight off," said Hosea.

"No time for no questionin' nor nowt!" said the blacksmith. "Theer one minute, as it were, and not theer the next, as you might say!"

"Just so," said Hosea. "Only, the minutes 'ud be seconds."

"Linacre, then, 'ud know nowt about it, if t' woman powered t' poison into his mouth while he were asleep?" said another member of the company.

"Never know anything at all," replied Hosea.

Everybody drew a long breath, and sought comfort at mug, or pewter, or glass.

"It's a poorish sort o' death to dee is that theer," observed the blacksmith, after a pause of thoughtfulness. "Ye retire to bed after a good dinner and a glass or two (he'd had a good feed and plenty to sup, had Linacre, by all accounts, seein' what they found i' t' house), and ye lig yersen down comfortable atween t' sheets and go to sleep peaceful like, and a woman comes and powers poison into yer

mouth and ye can do nowt to stop her! A poorish end."

"Happen Linacre slept with his mouth wide open," somebody ventured to suggest. "Some folk does."

"Wide oppen or close shut, t' woman powered t' poison into it, onnyway, mi lad," said the blacksmith. "That were t' main thing."

"I would like to hear what Michael Lambert could tell about t' affair," said the gamekeeper; "but ye might as well try to get butter out of a dog's throat as get owt out o' Michael. He weern't tell a single word."

"No, of course he won't," said Hosea. "The Lambert family's too much mixed up with the matter. It's sort of what they call subjudicey with them, is this here affair."

The blacksmith glanced round the room, and seeing nobody personally or intimately related to the Lamberts present, said in a husky whisper:

"Aye, what about t' young woman?"

Nobody ventured a remark—not even Hosea.

"Now, it seems a shame," continued the blacksmith, looking around him, "a shame 'at such a fine young lass should hev' her career, as you might term it, spoiled at t' beginnin' by a little misfortun' like that theer. T' man's dead now—an' varry likely damned an' all—and its owered and done wi', and what I say is 'at t' poor lass owt to hev' another start. Dang it all, theer's lots o' lasses 'at goes a bit

wrong at first 'at turns out rare good 'uns i' t' end."

"Aye, that's right enough, that is," said the gamekeeper. "It's human natur', is that theer."

"Happen t' lass will mek a new start," said somebody in the chimney corner. "Reuben Gaunt were soft enough on her at one time, till she went to service, and——"

"Hod yer wisht!" said a neighbour. "Here's Reuben himself."

Reuben, who had been spending most of the evening at another hostelry at the farther end of Up-Town, and had only looked in at the Plough and Harrow to see if Hosea Yardsworth were there, came slowly into the circle of yellow light cast by the swinging lamp. He was only a little intoxicated that night, and swayed but slightly as he stood staring about him.

"Who's talkin' about me?" he demanded, looking from one face to the other. "Eh—who?"

"Nobody i' particular, my lad," answered the blacksmith soothingly. "We're nobbut sayin' in a kind manner, like, 'at you owt to settle down and think of steadiness. Now 'at all this here unpleasantness is ower, and t' man dead and done for, you an' t' lass might do worse nor come together agan, and——"

Reuben turned a livid face and burning eyes upon him, and for a moment the blacksmith shrank back as if he expected a blow. And Reuben's fists clenched as he stood upright, sobered.

"Ye mind yer own business, d'yer see!" he said in a low voice. "Ye can find summat else to talk about. Are you comin' home, Hosea?"

"No, my lad," answered Hosea. "Not just now."

Reuben went out of the kitchen and into the road. He stood hesitating for a moment, wondering or not whether to go back to the public house in Up-Town. Finally he turned homewards, his hands thrust deeply in his pockets, his head sunk on his chest. Those few words of the blacksmith's had set him off thinking. He presently sat down on a low wall by the wayside and thought until the dusky twilight faded into the midsummer night.

When Reuben at last got up and went away towards Down-Town, it was as dark as a summer night can be, and in the windows of the little cottages he saw the faint twinklings of the dip candles. Just as he came to the Lamberts' cottage, Keziah stepped out of the garden gate and went across the road to Belford's farm. There was the light of a lamp in the Lambert house-place, and the window blind had not been drawn. In there, said Reuben to himself, was Mia.

He had never seen her since her return, for the girl had kept strictly within doors, and Keziah had exercised a jealous guardianship. And now as he stood there, knowing that she was so near, a great longing to see her again came over him. He glanced about him in the darkness; there was no one about; Keziah had already gone within the Belfords' door,

and closed it upon herself. Reuben opened the garden gate noiselessly, and slipping gently within, crept along under the shadow of the holly-hedge, and stealing up to the window, cautiously approached his face to the glass and looked in.

He saw Mia sitting in the old place on the fender, nursing her baby. Her face was bent over it, and it seemed to Reuben that she was singing it to sleep.

He went away after a while, but instead of turning into the ramshackle cottage which he and Hosea shared, he walked forward to the outer edge of the houses and sat down on the wall of the old well. There was no particular reason why he should have gone there, but there he went and there he sat down, resting his head in his hands and thinking. The liquor he had drunk that evening—not a great deal for him—had gone out of his brain, and he was beginning to see things. It seemed to him as if he were waking out of a dream.

As he sat there, the figure of a woman, carrying a pail, suddenly came full upon him out of the darkness. The woman caught sight of him and uttered a frightened exclamation. Reuben stood up hurriedly and spoke a name. "Mia!" he said. "Mia!"

He thought she would have turned and fled, so quick was the movement she made, but instead, she set down the pail as if it had suddenly become too heavy for her. She made no answer, but in the darkness Reuben heard her breathing heavily. He could hear his own heart beating—it was indeed beating so

violently that he thought he would choke. "I'll—I'll draw the water for you, Mia," he said in little more than a whisper.

He threw back the trap-door of the well, attached the pail to the chain which dangled from the windlass, and releasing the clutch, let chain and pail fall clattering down the deep well until they splashed into the water far below. Then he drew the pail up again, full to the brim, took it off the chain, and having secured the top lid, possessed himself of Mia's burden as she was about to lay hold of it. Their fingers touched each other on the handle.

"I'll carry it, Mia," he said.

Side by side they went down the side of the slight eminence on which the well stood. The lights in the little houses were out now; only that in the Lamberts' cottage remained. They saw Keziah moving to and fro in the living room.

Reuben set the bucket down at the gate.

"Good-night, Mia," he said.

"Good-night—Reuben," she said, in a whisper that he could scarcely catch. "Thank you."

Reuben moved off in the shadows and watched her until she had entered the house. Then he turned to his own dwelling—its nakedness and squalor had never struck him so much before. Hosea Yardsworth had just come in, and having lighted a farthing dip which stood in an old blacking pot, no candlestick being available, was helping himself to gin out of a bottle which he had produced from a doorless cup-

board. He held the bottle towards Reuben with hospitable intent.

"Have a drain, lad?" he said.

"No," answered Reuben shortly. "I don't want none."

"Every man to his liking," said Hosea sententially, and drank Reuben's share as well as his own.

Reuben, half-undressed, tossed and tumbled half through the night on the miserable bed in the miserable sleeping-chamber. There were holes in the roof, and snow and rain came through in winter. But the holes let in pure air in spring and summer, and the morning sunlight shone through them. Its coming revived Reuben and stirred him up.

Leaving Hosea asleep he rose early that morning, made more of a toilet than he had attempted for many months, and about breakfast time, set off to Hopkinson's farm, and caught the farmer as he was having his first look around.

"Maister," he said, "will you give me a reg'lar job? I've had enough o' yon life. I'll never touch a drop o' drink agen as long as I live, and I'll pull misen round. Give us another chance, maister. I'll do what I've said. It's reight!"

Mr. Hopkinson regarded the penitent steadily for a moment.

"All right, my lad," he answered. "Go in and get your breakfast."

VIII

SOME four months later, when the stress of the harvest month was over, and the village had time to rest, one of the great annual events of Scarthington's year was celebrated. It might indeed be spoken of as the principal event of those which were generally looked forward to, inasmuch as it concerned both present and future generations, and it said much for the character of the inhabitants of both Up-Town and Down-Town, that so far it had been celebrated—and for some years—with neither rioting, bloodshed, or evil feelings as attendants upon it. On its first institution as an event trouble had been foretold as a result of it; so far no trouble had arisen.

This event was neither less nor more than an exhibition of young children. The idea had sprung from Mrs. Daubeney, who was for ever exercising her brain and expending her labours on efforts for the improvement of village life. Mrs. Daubeney read many books and newspapers, and assimilated new ideas from them. She had become deeply interested some years previously in the question of rearing children, and at her own expense had brought down a very clever lady from London to deliver lectures

to the Scarthington matrons on the best way of taking care of their babies. The mothers of the village had attended these lectures to please Mrs. Daubeny; some of them professed to have received much enlightenment; others said nothing and remained true to the old notions. But the lectures provided Mrs. Daubeny with an idea. She would put a premium on the proper care of the rising race. Accordingly she founded the Daubeny prizes. Every year there was to be an exhibition of young children, with awards to successful exhibitors; the awards were to be substantial. There was a prize of five pounds for the finest and healthiest baby of not less than six nor more than twelve months old; one of the same amount for the finest infant of between two and three years; and one of ten pounds for the best cared-for family where the eldest child was not more than twelve years old. There were also some minor prizes for little details, and altogether the village profited by Mrs. Daubeny's well-meant efforts. And taking one year with another things were so nicely distributed that there was small cause for heart-burning or jealousy; as for the children, they benefited in the handsomest fashion, and were looked after as if they belonged to a royal nursery.

There are so few events and happenings in the communal life of a village that one which springs from an instinct common to all nature must needs arouse a sympathy of the universal order. Everybody rejoices at Christmas because of the universal

sympathy in its idea ; most folks rejoice at Easter because of a further application of that idea. Mrs. Daubeney's idea as regards the proper bringing-up of infants appealed to everybody ; therefore everybody shared in it, and because they shared in it, desired to take some part in its celebration. There were many people in Up-Town and Down-Town who never went to the annual flower-show, in spite of the fact that nearly every cottager in the place strove hard to win prizes thereat ; many more—though they were chiefly women—would not be drawn from their labour or their ease to see the annual ploughing-match ; some indifferents made nothing of the annual feast. But all wished to see the show of babies, although everybody was already well acquainted with every infant and young child in the village. It was with the children as with the prize sheep and the fat cattle—private views were as nothing compared to the public showing forth, when the exhibit was prinked and perfected, and held up to criticism and admiration. And so on that day the whole population turned out to the schoolroom, where the unconscious entrants—unconscious, saving those of the older class—sat enthroned on their mothers' knees, awaiting the inspection and verdict of the anxious judges.

Mia watched the Down-Town women from the cottage window on their way to the show. Down-Town, because of its poverty, was not greatly given to the cultivation of either health or beauty in infants ; nevertheless there were always one or two

children from its tumble-down cottages who were regarded as favourable chances, and one year Tin Tom's wife had won the first prize with her twins. Some of the women carried competitors on this occasion tricked out in as much finery as Down-Town finance could afford; they laughed and chattered as they went by, and one or two of them cast meaning glances at the Lamberts' window, where Mia stood hidden by the curtain. She understood, and her heart grew hot with a dull protesting anger. For Mia knew well, and the women knew well, that the child sleeping in the cradle by the hearth, the cradle in which Keziah, and Michael, and Mia had all slept in their own babyhood, was the most beautiful child, not only in Scarthington, but in all the countryside.

Keziah had gone to Normansholt that day, and Mia had the cottage all to herself. Everything was very quiet within the cottage and without; she suddenly felt that the silence was beginning to oppress her. And when the last of the Down-Town women, each in her best, had straggled up the road leading to the more genteel part of the village, she took the child out of the cradle, dressed it in the rich and expensive garments in which she had presented it to Linacre in the chapel, and having changed her own gown, went out with it into the calm sunlight of the September afternoon.

With the exception of daily excursions into the garden at the rear of the lean-to shed—a garden

which was well shielded from observation—Mia had never taken the baby out of the cottage since the night of her return home. She had shrunk from observation; she herself never went out until after dark, and then only to the well to fetch water for Keziah—a task which she insisted on performing every night. But now she walked boldly and firmly up the single street of the village; past the blacksmith's shop, past the Plough and Harrow, and so to the very heart of the place, where the old church stood on one side of the road and the schoolroom on the other. She was not conscious of what it was that impelled her to do this; she was not aware, indeed, that a strange anger, a dull resentment filled all her being.

There were many people about the schoolroom and in the road between it and the church. And some of them saw Mia approaching, and when they were assured of her absolute identity, burst—the women folk at any rate—into loud exclamations.

“Well, if that theer isn't Miss Lambert a-comin' up t' street, as bold as brass.”

“An' bringin' her misfortune wi' her—well, I never!”

“Happen she thinks they'll let her in to show it!”

One of the few men present, lounging against the schoolroom wall, laughed cynically.

“It 'ud be a bad job for some o' ye wimmen 'at's reck'nin' to win a prize if she did show it,” he said.

"It's t' best-lookin' bairn onnywheer about here, choose what!"

The assembled matrons, mostly young, burst into a storm of sneering repudiation.

"An' I wonder what ye know about it, James Grooby!" cried one. "Ye might think 'at we're all as ill-favoured as what ye are."

"I wodn't care if my bairns were as foul as t' Owd Lad hissen so long as they were honest," said another.

Mr. Grooby sneered again.

"Theer's some on yer's mighty pertikler about what ye call honesty," he said. "But I notice 'at ye run things pretty fine now and then—ye do so! An' yon their poor bairn's as I say, t' bonniest bairn i' all t' neighbourhood."

"Aye, it's a bonnie bairn," said another man. "I see'd it one day i' their gardin, when Keziah hed it out. Varry fond on it, is Keziah, seemin'ly."

The women turned their backs on the men with remarks which were far from cordial. They watched Mia's advance. She showed no consciousness of their presence, but walked down the road making for the gate of the churchyard. The women's tongues were loosened.

"Well, some folks has all t' impidence i' t' world!"

"Sitha, it's gowned i' real silk!"

"Aye; it's nobbut honest folk 'at hes to gown their bairns i' print and cotton!"

One woman, more vituperative than the rest, and

emboldened by their presence, walked a few paces into the road and shook her fist at Mia.

“Go home, ye brazen little baggage and tek’ yer brat wi’ yer!” she vociferated. “I wonder ye hev’ t’ insolence to show your face wheer respectable wimmen is. Go home!”

A chorus of strident voices echoed this admonition; there seemed a danger of the women closing in upon Mia and the child and doing them a mischief. The cynic intervened.

“Now then, none o’ that!” he said. “If onny on yer starts that theer game I shall fetch Mrs. Daubeny out o’ t’ schoolroom and she’ll gi’ yer what for i’ no time. Leave t’ lass alone—theer’s scarce one on yer ’at hesn’t been as bad yersens, and ye know it. Go across t’ churchyard, Mia, my lass, and go home.”

Mia turned under the old lych gate and crossed the churchyard, a volley of objurgations following her. She had maintained a proud front while the women were there, but her limbs were trembling as she went along the grass-grown paths and passed behind the church out of sight of them and out of reach of their voices. There was a wicket gate in the farther corner of the churchyard; she passed through it and into a narrow lane, fenced in by tall hedge-rows of hawthorn, now rapidly turning from green to yellow and red. It was very quiet there, and the soft sunlight fell in patches across the beaten path. Mia went on until she came to a bank where she

had often sat in childhood to bunch the cowslips which she had picked in the meadows that stretched away behind the tall hedgerows. And there she suddenly sat down, and pressing the baby closely to her, began to cry—softly, but steadily.

She was crying when Reuben Gaunt came along—returning from his work in an adjacent field. Reuben had seen Mia several times since he carried the water for her, but he had never spoken to her, and she did not know that he had seen her. Reuben, in fact, had made up his mind about certain things, and one was that he would not approach Mia, or Michael, or Keziah, until he had made a man of himself again. That process was going on at a rate which surprised everybody; he was long since restored to his pride of place at Hopkinson's; he had a new Sunday suit; he had begun to whistle at his work. Work, indeed, was all he seemed to think of.

And now here he was . . . and here was Mia, weeping.

It is only elementary folk who do the great things in life. Reuben was a very elementary man, who had been down into a pit; accordingly, he had a vast amount of sympathy for other people who had also been down into pits. He showed it in this case by picking the baby out of Mia's arms, carrying it off in his own arms, and showing it the sights of the lane while Mia had her cry out.

Mia, coming round, and looking through her fingers, saw Reuben kiss the baby.

There was a quiet way home from the end of the lane—Reuben carried the baby all the way. And that night when Mia went to the well for the water Reuben was waiting for her.

IX

IN THE succeeding winter Old Wellington died, and Michael and Rebecca, sorrowful enough that he could not go with them, thought once more of the Promised Land. Stay longer in England, and especially in Scarthington, Michael would not. He was too proud and too indifferent to vulgar criticism to care about the hard words that had been said of his family because of Mia; that sort of thing, he knew, would have died out, been lived down very quickly, would have been well nigh forgotten, as soon as a new occasion of gossip arose. But to be a shepherd all his life, to remain a mere appendage to the life of an English farm, to grow old and feeble in service and at last to be of no more account than the worn-out horse or out-of-date machine—that was not in Michael's purview. He wanted a wider horizon, a bigger chance, and now he meant to have it.

There was nothing outstanding between him and Reuben now, and together they matured their plans. For Reuben was for new worlds and a new life, and Mia was going with him to share both. The village folk said Reuben was a fool and must be soft in the head to show such fondness for a bairn that was not

his own; Reuben, however, went about with a serenity of countenance which betokened anything but weakness of intellect and purpose. He looked as if he had been through many fires and had come out all the better for them, and he had certainly learnt to regard criticism with an unruffled look. Besides, he was looking far ahead, following the sun, which every day beckoned him westward.

One Saturday Michael and Reuben asked and obtained a half-holiday from their masters and went to Clothford. They had a long interview there with an emigration agent and returned home with their pockets stuffed full of papers and pamphlets. The pamphlets contained many pictures of glorious blue lakes bordered by snow-capped mountains; of golden cornlands, stretching away to an infinite distance; of snug homesteads under a glowing sky. All the same, said the agent, it was not always picnic-time out there.

That night Keziah had held a sort of family tea-party at which Rebecca and Mia and the baby had been the guests. Keziah had some notion of what Michael and Reuben were after; information about Canada was constantly arriving; constantly she heard the two young men discussing probabilities and chances. It was in her mind that there was to be a breaking up.

Michael and Reuben were very quiet when they returned home, and they ate their supper in silence. But later when they were all seated round the hearth,

Mia in her old place on the fender with the child on her knees, and Rebecca and Keziah busy with their knitting, Michael, after exchanging a glance with Reuben, spoke.

"Now, my lasses," he said, with an attempt at cheeriness, "Reuben and me's got news for you. You all know what we've had in our minds this long time about emigrating—well, we've been to see the agent to-day and we're settled to go. Next Saturday we're going back again to book the passages for the four on us—me and 'Becca, Reuben and Mia. But——"

He paused, and none of them dared to look at each other, and Keziah became more deeply concerned in her knitting.

"But there's one thing to be considered," Michael continued with an obvious effort. "It's thee, Keziah, my lass. Art coming with us, or no? For we must go, Keziah—we can't stay here longer. There's life out yonder that the likes of us can never get here, hard as it is to leave the old country, and we must go and find it. Come with us, Keziah—they say women's wanted out there."

Keziah laughed.

"Not women like me, my lad," she said. "They want young and good-lookin' 'uns there, I'm thinkin', not owd maids like me."

"You're not so old as all that, Keziah," said Rebecca. "And look what a good housekeeper you are."

"It's the thing that holds us all back, is that," said Reuben. "There's none of us likes to think of

leaving you behind, Keziah. Why, you'd be all alone."

It was in Keziah's mind to say that in a certain sense she had been all alone all her life, but she only shook her head and said nothing.

"Let's make a family party of it," said Michael. "Come, Keziah, there's naught to stop here for."

But Keziah looked round. She let her knitting drop in her lap and gazed at the familiar objects around her. And with a sudden deep insight into the verities of her life she knew she would never leave that cottage until old age or death forced her out of it to the care of others or the grave.

"No," she said quietly. "It's no use, Michael, and all of you—I shan't go. I could never leave here—I'm like an old tree that's got roots stuck right fast in the ground—you'd have to drive me out by force. I should never rest, nor eat, nor feel that I could breathe, if I went elsewhere. I'm used to all this and when folks get to my age they don't like changes. Go, all of you, and start your new lives and never mind me. I've saved a bit, and I can earn my own living, for Mrs. Daubeney's laundress has left and the old lady's offered me the job. I shall have a pound a week, bless you! Go—and do well, and if you make money, why, you can come over and see t'owd place agen—it'll none be altered, I can promise you. I daresay it'll be a better life there nor what it is here—but I'll bide where I am."

They all knew that when Keziah had once made

up her mind it was of no use to argue with her, and they accepted her decision, but with a regret which they could as yet scarcely realize. As for Keziah herself, having once made that decision she was happier and more confident of the future. For she had had some dreams of new life in a new land, and had been tempted to leave the old world behind.

"But it 'ud never ha' done," she said to herself that night, when all the rest were asleep and she stood alone in the living room, looking round at the household gods. "It 'ud ha' broken my heart to see the old place pulled to pieces. I'll keep it as it always were—there shan't be a thing moved out of its place. An' happen i' years to come some on 'em, or maybe their children, 'll come back and find it as it's always been, and me an owd woman, waitin' th' end."

On a spring evening Keziah stood alone on the riverside stage at Liverpool watching the emigrant ship sail slowly away down the Mersey. The sun was sinking in the west in a glory of crimson light, and it seemed to beckon men and women to follow it. But Keziah drew her shawl about her, and turned eastward.

THE END



T 62508